borderline

THE Comics Magazine

July #12

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THE COMICS MAGAZINE

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This month's absurdly sincere thanks go to Jason Kingsley, Kev F. Sutherland, Dennis Wojda (again), Justine Shaw, Mike Carey and to every one of you who voted for Borderline in the NCAs and who donated to the *Save Borderline Appeal* – the fact you're reading this proves your worth! Cover design by the wonderful Jim Campbell, exclusive American Century cover art by Marc Laming – Next month a new look...

Plus congratulations to John Parkinson and his new wife Cicci and a farewell to regular columnist Sarah Littlehales, who is moving on to other things.

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INDUSTRY STANDARD

Phil Hall on good times and bad times...

SATURDAY, 1, June 2002 was the second best day of my life (the best being the day I married my wife, Paula). **Borderline** had won the National Comics Award for the Best Specialist Magazine Or Website. I had a two-hour meeting with a UK-based publisher about producing a newsstand version of **Borderline**. The sun was shining, Bristol was buzzing. I was surrounded by a lot of friends and colleagues, and a good friend of mine, who I'd thought was going to let me down (because he's good at letting me down) didn't let me down at all and turned up at the Comics Festival with a big bag of grass. I got to spend the very latter part of the evening "completely out of my tree". This was truly the day to beat all other days.

The National Comics Award, in the cold light of day, is a lump of unvarnished softwood holding a sheet of glass that has a piece of patterned sticky back transparent plastic stuck over it for decoration. But I love it to bits. The discussions with the publisher about a newsstand **Borderline** came to nothing, but I think I have a new friend in the industry. One of my other friends got lumbered with the hotel bill; I'm now hoping that I can get that refunded to him.

Pretty soon after my good friend went home, the grass ran out…

...

I love this industry, but it has crapped on me continually, from a great height, since I was a teenager. That Saturday, I felt like one of the most important people in comics, but while that feeling was fantastic I knew the day's payback – its antithesis – was just around the corner.

On that fabulous hot day at Comics 2002, there was one moment… It was just before midnight at the end of a day that had started with a thumping, nauseating hangover. I wanted to take the award up to my hotel room in case it got damaged. As I got into my room, I opened the curtains and looked down on the street below, where maybe 150 comic fans were mingling, drinking, laughing and joking on an unusually warm English evening. Some of them saw me and raised their glasses. I smiled, waved back, shut the curtains and realised at that moment that it couldn't, wouldn't, get any better for me.

After the nightmare of the previous year - getting fired from **Comics International**, losing my brother-in-law, having my former employer attempt to sue me just because I exercised my statutory rights, discovering that one of my best friends was covertly undermining everything we were attempting to do with **Borderline**; all the other pointless, and to all of you, insignificant things. That award felt like 'vindication' for all the hard work and the shit I've put up with. Do you know something? I was accused of inciting ballot-stuffing and as a result of my acceptance speech being tweaked by Kev F. Sutherland, I was accused of rewriting my own history. And I've had my private life discussed – in passing – in print!

I must be a really bad man…

However, that was a great moment. I finally felt as though, after 27 years in this industry, I was getting something back. If I could have bottled that feeling, I'd be a rich man.

But that was June 1. The next two changeable June weeks were hell. I've been the innocent victim of a communications breakdown in the real world that has left me without any work for a five-week period. I saw the bank get heavy with me and I've watched my normally very strong and ever-optimistic wife crumble into a pile of worry, anxiety and nerves. It isn't so bad as we see out the month…

This was going to be my final column in the magazine. Well, my final editorial. The chances of **Borderline** becoming a national newsstand magazine died and negotiations about becoming a Direct Market magazine stalled when all parties realised the amount of capital required to keep the project afloat during its first three months. So, we're left with the Internet - the place where we started.

I love the Internet, and I hate it. I love it because it has gotten us where we are today - for good or bad. It is a wonderful educational tool and eventually it will find its niche. However, the Internet also gives "power" to faceless nonentities. It's a false power, but it's wielded with a ferocity that is sometimes frightening. Most of these people are masters of invective but probably would shit their pants, or at least be backtracking so fast you wouldn't see them for platitudes, if you confronted them personally. What makes me even more incensed by these holier-than-thou morons is that if they actually used that energy and what is in some cases genuine wit and talent to good use, reasonable people might not think of them as complete wankers. Yeah, I know, a likely scenario.

There were people who thought *The Save Borderline Appeal* was wrong and that we shouldn't have done it. I mean, we're obviously very different from the likes of Top Shelf and Drawn & Quarterly, both of which have had publicised Internet appeals - we don't actually produce a physical product, so we don't fall into the same category as them. It doesn't matter that we've achieved more in 12 months for some creators than most websites will probably achieve in 50 years. I asked for money because when Cool Beans World went bust it was six weeks after we got involved with them and for the first month at least we all believed we had extra money to play with - and because we had extra money to play with the freelancers among us took less work on and eventually the economics of the situation had a cumulative effect resulting in some of the Borderline editorial becoming borderline bankrupts.

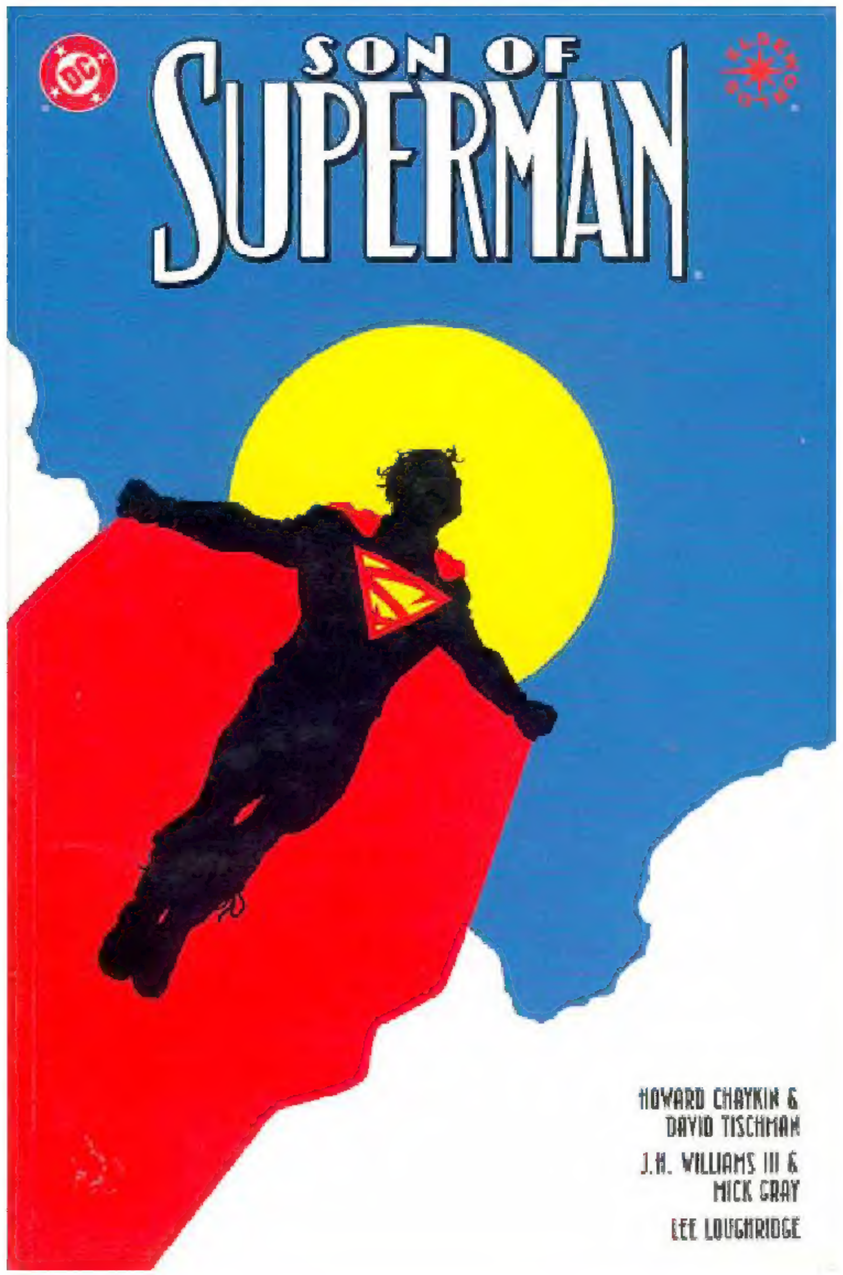
Besides, what was so wrong about us asking the industry for money? It's guaranteed our immediate future. You're reading #12, and #13 and #14 are currently in development. You can pat yourselves on the back and you have all of our gratitude and appreciation. I, especially, feel humbled in the presence of all of you and I'll do my damnedest to repay you in spades!

June started brilliantly – the best ever – and it then got very rough. July will bring better times for all of us. That's one thing of which I'm certain of.

A CENTURY OF STORIES

HE WRITES (SOME OF) THE WORDS – DAVID TISCHMAN INTERVIEWED

DAVID TISCHMAN is one half – though he's not saying which half he is – of the Chaykin and Tischman team that writes, among other things, American Century. David also works as a solo comics writer, having produced the revamp and relaunch of Cable for Marvel Comics. He spoke to Borderline's Martin Shipp…



BORDERLINE: So, David: the world was waiting for new Howard Chaykin comics material, and it got you as co-writer. How'd you meet Howard?

David Tischman: Howard and I met – too long ago – almost ten years ago. I was working in development and Howard, I think, had just started *Viper.* I had this idiotic/grandiose notion that someone in Hollywood would actually make a *Doc Savage* movie set in the 1940s. I'd been reading comics since I was nine years old, and I knew Howard was the guy to write it. We met, he loved the idea, and the rest, as they say, is a friendship neither of us wanted.

BL: And when did the two of you decide to work together?

DT: Cut to: five years, and two development jobs later. Howard and I had pitched a number of projects together. We'd been talking about another period piece, this one set in 1888, in which P.T. Barnum and a group of circus freaks save the United States. This is way back in '96, maybe even '95. Before *Wild Wild West* came out (and bombed), before anyone'd heard of The League Of Extraordinary Gentlemen. No one saw the franchise. After a pointless meeting at a TV company, I asked Howard if he'd consider doing the project as a comic book. My contract was coming up, and I was burnt out on development.

About the same time, Shelly Bond had called Howard about doing a book for Vertigo. *Barnum* seemed like something she'd respond to. And she did. It took us three years to get it off the ground - and another year to write it - but it's finally going to see print sometime next year.

I'll never forget what Howard said to me. "You sure you want to do this?" Meaning comics. And like an idiot fan-boy, I said, "Sure. Of course I do. I've wanted to write comics since I was a kid." We joke about it now.

But we really enjoyed working together, and that led to Son Of Superman, an Elseworlds we wrote for Andy Helfer, and then Pulp Fantastic (for Shelly), and Secret Society Of

Super-Heroes (for Helfer).

BL: Are you in the same room when you write? By which I mean: there's a certain creative synergy when two people work right next to each other, and this often leads to a better, more energetic result. Of course the opposite applies: Elton John and Bernie Taupin allegedly never worked in the same room, and look at some of the crap they came out with.
DT: When Howard and I write together, we take turns doing nothing. Seriously, though, it's a constant collaboration. We're not in the same room - thank God, because we'd kill each other - but it's an endless stream of phone calls and e-mails as we hone an idea and write the scripts. Maybe the occasional coffee on a Saturday morning, if we're just starting a new project. There's so much back-and-forth, by the end, who knows who came up with what?

Bottom line: Howard and I are on the same wavelength, creatively. I don't think there's been a time when we actively disagreed about the direction a story should take. And when you get down to specific lines of dialogue, we discuss and compromise - and if one of us feels strongly about something, the other one lets it happen. The best kind of give-and-take.

BL: Do you take different approaches when working with HC and when doing your solo material?
DT: I think the difference, if any, has to do with the tone of the material. The material Howard and I tend to do is based in crime fiction, call it "hard-boiled" or "noir," or whatever. I'm speaking mainly of American Century, but Pulp Fantastic, too. Or the Elseworlds, in which we tend to both enjoy deconstructing the myth and adding a "real world" quality to the characters.

When I was writing Cable, I brought a lot of the tone Howard and I use, because I felt that's what Nathan Summers should be. But the stories and characters were more politicized because that was the point of the book.

On Barnum, that's a much more fanciful tone - I think people may be a bit surprised.

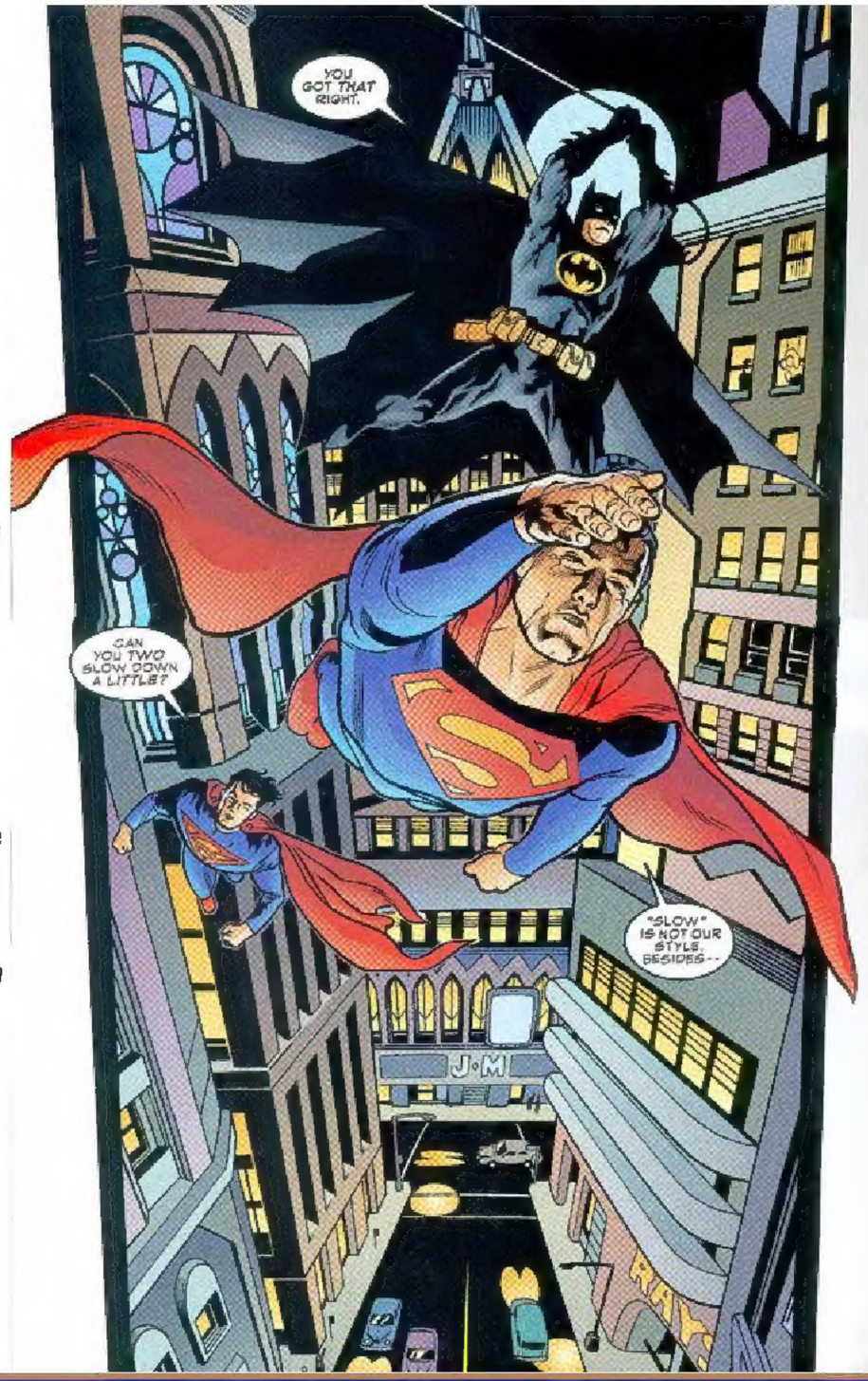
BL: When I'm doing an interview I always ask the Borderline Features group if there's anything they've always wanted to ask the subject. One question's come up again and again for you: "Mutant X: Why?"
DT: Let's not go there, shall we? (We can have a private conversation about this sometime, but for an on-the-record comment, I'll pass.)

BL: American Century: a Vertigo book that doesn't concern elves. Difficult pitch?
DT: Not at all. Thank God. Shelly was looking for a new monthly, and the three of us hammered out the pitch over a long conference call. Shelly - an amazing editor, by the way - enjoys crime fiction as much as we do. And Karen Berger saw the possibilities in exposing the underbelly of the 1950s, a period most of us think of as happy and tranquil.

And without kissing up too much, I have to say that Vertigo is a great place to work. The editors are open to different ideas and approaches – where else could we do a monthly crime book and Angel & The Ape?

BL: A British penciller and a British inker working on a peculiarly American book: what do you think Marc and John bring to AC?
DT: The only difference I think it makes – and it's a subtle one – is that Marc and John, being English, have a stylized view of America, and American history. Just as I would, if I were writing a book about England. The view "across the pond" makes certain things stand out, in terms of detail. That's a plus.

Marc is a terrific artist. So I don't care if he lives in Antarctica. He's brought a great visual style to American Century - his *look* for the book is an integral part of the real-life crime tone we wanted for the book. And John Stokes is just one



of the best inkers out there.

I've been very lucky with artists. From my first project. Everybody's been great.

BL: And an AC question from another of the creative team (hey, guess who?): what movie are you going to rip off next?

DT: <Laughs> Rip off? Us? That's called *homage*, mister. It's in Issue #24, and all I'll say is you should bone up on your Clint Eastwood, Gary Cooper and Alan Ladd movies, because it's a *western*.

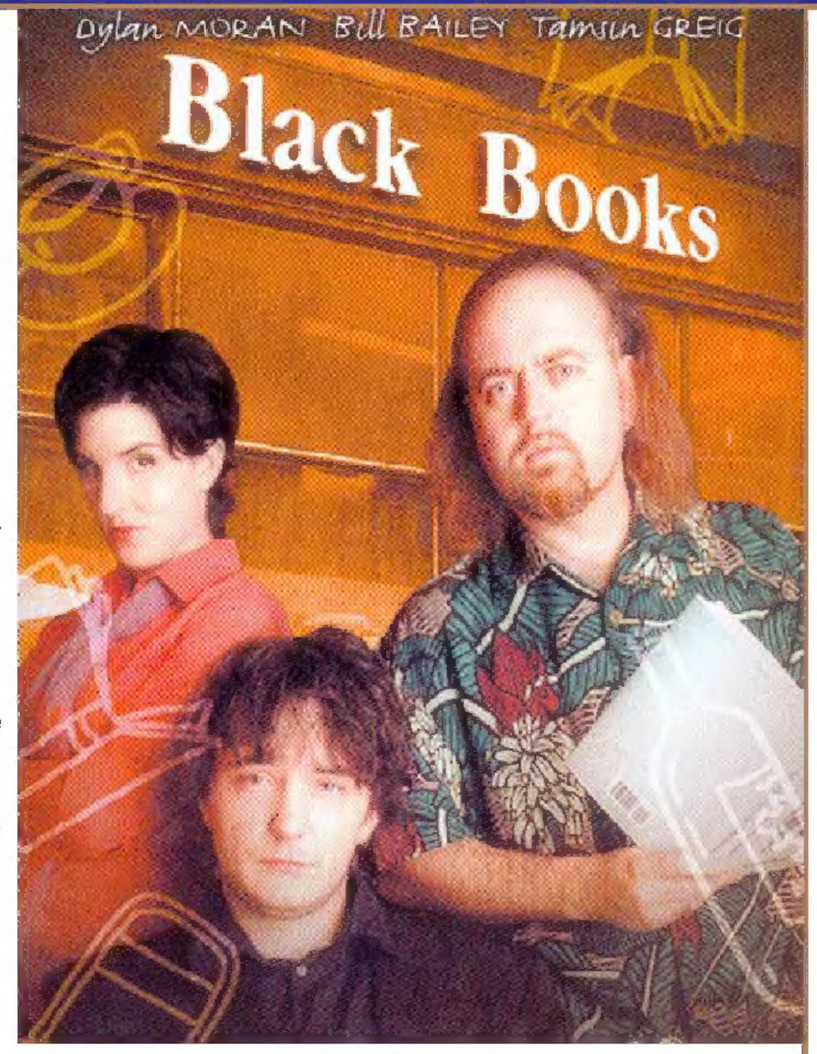
BL: There's a strong element of the political to your work; it's there in AC, it came out strongly in the more contemporary setting of Cable. Strong political upbringing/beliefs?

DT: It's funny, because I'm personally far more conservative than the stories I write. (At least I was before the current administration took office, but that's another story.) I can't explain what it is - maybe liberal choices just make for better drama. Howard, I think, is probably more liberal on certain things than I am; I certainly *believe* in every political concept that's explored in the stories I write, but I look at them sometimes and think, "Where did that come from?". Look for Green Lantern: Evil's Might, starting later this summer, a three-book Elseworlds mini-series about Kyle Raynor, a political cartoonist in late 1880s New York, using the power of the ring to take on the corruption of Boss Tweed and the villainy of Tammany Hall.

BL: Come to think of it, who is David Tischman anyway? Where's he from? What are his influences?

DT: I'm from suburban New Jersey. No jokes, please. I grew up as a fat, horny Jewish kid with a big comic collection and an interest in science fiction. Did I mention horny? I've been in California for 16 years, been with the same, great (and patient) woman for six, and we have two terrific cats (photos available upon request).

Influences - probably television, mostly. I still want every problem I have to boil down to a half-hour episode of Family Ties.



BL: Is there anything on TV that you make a point of watching, for good or ill?

DT: My favorite shows usually don't last long. *Strangers With Candy*, on Comedy Central, was brilliant. And British comedies - and no, I don't say that because you've got a British readership. Of course *Fawlty Towers*, but also *Reginald Perrin* and, most recently, *Black Books*. I find *Enterprise* alternately frustrating and brilliant. *Saturday Night Live* as long as Will Ferrell stays on. And *VIP*. Hysterical.

BL: What are you listening to right now?

DT: Musically, my taste stopped back in the mid-70s. A lot of Bob Dylan. Bruce Springsteen. Warren Zevon. Jackson Browne when I'm in a mood. Pop music. And, okay, I have a big crush on Ms. Spears.

The other thing I listen to, and one of my real passions, is the old radio dramas from the Forties and Fifties – *Nightbeat*, *Johnny Dollar*, *The Six Shooter*, *Tales of the Texas Rangers* - I love that stuff.

BL: Barnum: tell us about it. It's been in the pipeline for quite a while, hasn't it?

DT: See my comments above. Barnum is an amazing book. A 128-page hardcover from Vertigo. A much gentler, comedic tone than Howard and I usually take. Niko Henrichon is our brilliant artist – the book looks great. I can't *wait* for it to come out.

HER WORD IS HER BOND - THE EDITOR

SOMEBODY has to keep these American Century boys in order: that somebody is Vertigo editor Shelly Bond. Martin "Borderline's" Shipp had a quick chat with her...

BL: As this is the big American Century feature, let's talk about that. What attracted you to Howard and David's pitch for the book?
SB: I recall thinking that it was high time I went for a traditional "boy book" to prove that then-editor Axel Alonso wasn't the only editor who could wear combat boots and craft an action/adventure monthly. But I knew if I were going to pull it off, I'd have to hire a creator who could really deliver the goods in a hard-boiled, inimitable fashion. Strangely enough, the first person (and only person!) on my list was Howard Chaykin. We worked together with David Tischman on the V2K miniseries, Pulp Fantastic (left), and I really wanted to work with them again. Mere minutes after my first phone call, Howard pitched me American Century and I was instantly taken with the series. In addition to the anti-hero allure of Harry Kraft, and the proverbial globetrotting (from Guatemala to Hollywood to North Carolina in the first year!), what also appealed to me most about the series was the timing. You have to remember that for monthly books, we usually try to work about a year or more in advance. When we were first discussing American Century, the millennium was quickly approaching, and, understandably, many other books were focusing on futurism. I loved the fact that AC was a period piece, set during the golden halfway point of the 20th century. I thought releasing a book set in the 1950s in 2001 would instantly set it apart.

BL: AC is quite literally an American comicbook but your choices of regular penciller and inker are both British. Do you think Marc and John's detachment - geographical, historical, emotional, whatever - has an effect upon the book's creative synergy?
SB: I still believe that the best artist(s) for the job are the most talented ones, regardless of sex, race, religion and/or location. As long as there's reference (which Howard, David and Marc have in spades) and it looks awesome, it doesn't matter to me. However, I must confess that I found it quite ironic that the best penciller and inker for the assignment did indeed live in my favorite country (more arse-kissing to come).

Both Marc and John are incredibly talented and have contributed greatly to this series. I recall that Karen Berger came back from Comics 2000 (I was busy getting married...) with samples from Marc that featured a very detailed (imagine that) Swamp Thing and a very disgruntled (imagine that) Constantine. Howard, David, Karen and I agreed that he was the perfect penciller to bring American Century to life. John Stokes and I had been working together for years on The Invisibles and he has always been, in my opinion, one of the finest inkers in comics. I knew he could handle Marc's elaborate rendering (even without losing his eyesight) because John had worked so well with other detailed pencillers such as Phil Jimenez and Chris Weston. It was no surprise to me that Marc and John clicked from the very first page. The entire team is responsible for the synergy - from the way that Howard and David write, to the art team (including Luke Ross's amazing guest-pencilling contributions) to Pam Rambo's lush color palette to the seps, lettering and phenomenal cover paintings by Glen Orbik and the upcoming Jim Silke.

BL: What haven't you done that you'd like to? (and that can apply to anything you like)
SB: Comics-wise, I've always wanted to jetset to unique urban locales in comics and with Karen's help, I came up with the "Vertigo Pop!" concept. (See below and *www.vertigo.com* for more details.) Musically, I'd love to see Suede live. I still think that back in the mid-90s when Morrison and the masses were battling over Oasis vs. Blur in the letters pages of The Invisibles, Suede was the ultimate Brit Pop Band. I think only Chris Weston and I voted for them, but to this day, it remains fact not fiction!

BL: You've earned the right to plug your upcoming projects: off you go!
SB: Big summer events, out in July:

Vertigo Pop! Tokyo - the first of three 4-issue miniseries that capture the pulse of pop culture in exciting urban environs. Written by Jon Vankin (of Big Book Of... fame) and illustrated by Seth Fisher, it's a 4-issue hyper-accelerated supersonic thrill ride from the bottom of a Yakuza gang to the top of the pop charts.

And in August: Lucifer: Nirvana, a 48-page Prestige graphic novel by Mike Carey and painter Jon J Muth. It details what happens when a contract is put out on the devil and it's set in the luminous streets of Beijing.

And there's a new storyline coming up in American Century: Harry returns to the Windy City in *Coming Home*.

WILD ABOUT HARRY

MARC LAMING first came to most people's attention when he was named as the penciller on American Century, the first new comics work in years by veteran badboy Howard Chaykin. Borderline's Martin Shipp talked to Laming by phone in a conversation that starts well but veers off into unexpected territories…

Borderline: Hello.
Marc Laming: Hello.

BL: Let's talk about history to start with. Formal training?
ML: Formal training? Usual route, Foundation course in Art, then on to do a degree in Graphic Design and Illustration at Camberwell.

BL: That's a proper art school, is it?
ML: Very boring, very normal.

BL: Was there a lot of comics stuff being done then?
ML: I suppose I didn't do anything to do with comics up until the second year of my degree course, and then it just kind of took over as a discipline. It just doesn't go away, I suppose.

BL: It's with you from the beginning, isn't it?
ML: Yeah, so I wasn't a very popular student, I was a bit of a pariah with my lecturers just because...

BL: He's drawing comics!
ML: Exactly.

BL: Lock him up!
ML: Of which they had exactly no understanding, with no interest either.

BL: Do you think that's still happening at art schools today?
ML: Oh, I'm sure it is.

BL: Tutors are either leaning toward the fine art or toward the commercial, and there's a barrier between the two?
ML: It's kind of hard to comment, really. Not having been in higher education teaching for a while. I couldn't tell you what the leanings were, and it all depends on what college as well. Different departments have different bents.

BL: There isn't a National School of Cartooning.
ML: Well, there isn't even in America.

BL: You've got the Kubert School in America.
ML: Yes, but that's only one small school.

BL: It's still specialised, though, and we don't have an equivalent here.
ML: No, not really.

BL: So you're drawing these comics while you're at school, and obviously you've got professional influences and we'll come back and talk about those later, but what about the earlier influences? What are your first memories of reading comics?
ML: Probably [the TV weekly comic] Countdown.

BL: Yeah?
ML: Or Pippin, even.

BL: The old Odhams stuff?
ML: Yeah. Playhour and that sort of thing. Comics were really what taught me to read, I suppose.

BL: It's a case of reading anything you can get hold of when you're a kid, isn't it?
ML: Oh definitely. I also had an aunt who was considered irresponsible by the rest of the family, who used to get me old horror comics and things to keep me quiet when I used to stay there, which was always handy.

BL: Best kind of aunt.
ML: Oh yeah. I was reading TV21 and Countdown, and the *Doctor Who* strips in that because it was what I liked on telly when I was little. Not that that continued any further, but it's the sort of thing that influences you then. Anything with Gerry Anderson in it, of course, was a bonus as well.

BL: Even today – all the Graham Bleathman stuff?
ML: Oh, definitely.

BL: It's a shame there was as little attention paid to him as there was at the Bristol Comics 2002 festival. Seemed like hardly anybody was looking at his display, except the comics professionals.
ML: Maybe they've had the same experience as me. And they were ignoring Shane Rimmer, which is dreadfully sad!

BL: He's the voice man.
ML: Yeah! He was Scott Tracy!

BL: This is your childhood, being ignored! It's not right, is it?
ML: No, especially when you've

got such wonderful things as Transformers and Micronauts making a big splash at the moment.

BL: Do you think there should be a big push to get that sort of thing back on?
ML: What, decent TV for kids? Of course!

<There follows a brief interlude in which the participants discuss the potential merits or otherwise of a yet-to-be-screened television animated series based on British comic hero Dan Dare>

BL: So that's what your childhood influences were, what about now? What's influencing you as a professional?
ML: Well, influences chop and change, but I think the earliest influences that have stayed with me would probably be Gil Kane, who I've always loved, don't know why, I'm probably the only person who always loved his up-the-nose shots. I loved the fact that the camera was shoved that far up into the action. Let's see. Bill Sienkiewicz, big fan of his...

BL: Oh yes!
ML: When I first saw his work on Moon Knight, and you'll probably be able to tell which issue it was...

BL: Ooh, was it #16?
ML: I think it possibly was. "*Hit It*".

BL: Possibly 21, 22, around there. We'll check it out, put it in the edited version. <It was #27>
ML: That was like a watershed moment for me in looking at comics. I'd never really seen Neal Adams before, either, at that point, not being a DC fan...

BL: So you didn't notice the Adams influence on Sienkiewicz?
ML: No, so just suddenly seeing this photorealistic then sort of Ralph Steadman-y artwork just blew my head away. I hadn't seen anything like that before. Frank Miller was working at the same time, wasn't he, as well?

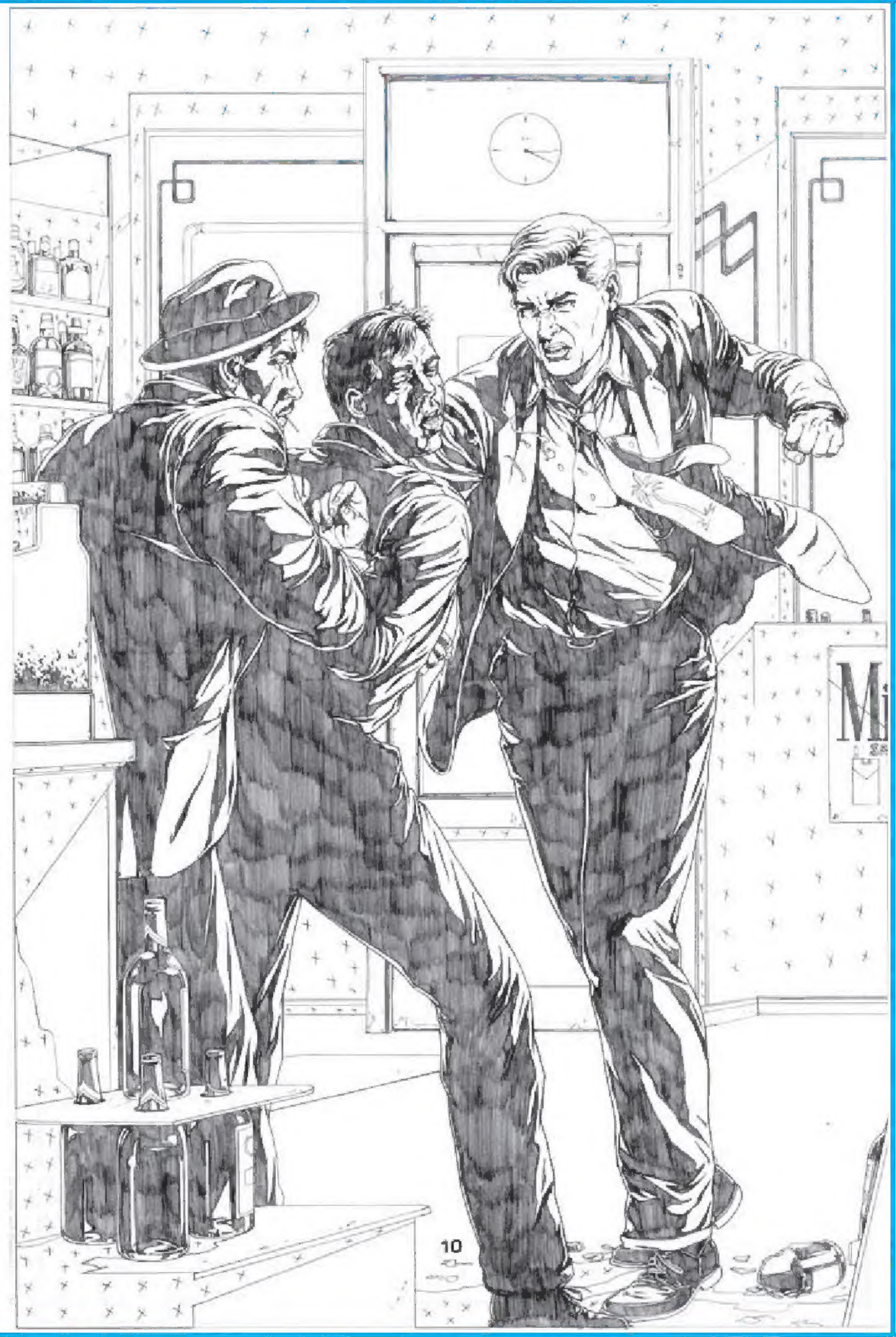
BL: Yeah, I think he was doing Daredevil pretty much the same time. <Miller worked on Daredevil starting in 1979, Sienkiewicz on Moon Knight in 1981>
ML: Which again was something I totally missed out on. I didn't really dig his stuff at all at the time. Who else did I like from about that period? Bill Sienkiewicz was like a big thing. Michael Golden! I was a big fan of his. He did a fantastic issue of Star Wars, which I loved. And then of course there's Howard, who I've always liked.

BL: Well, let's get into Working With Howard. Because most people would know your work from American Century, which is with Howard and with David, but there's kind of a link that goes back further, isn't there? I'm thinking in particular of the Star Wars thing that you just mentioned.
ML: Oh what, Star Wars #1 being the first American comic I'd seen? Oh yes! So it was quite a big deal suddenly finding out, because [DC Vertigo editor] Shelly [Bond] had been banging on about this book that she wanted me to work on, and wouldn't tell me who the writers were until I was sent the proposal. And then you get sent the proposal and emblazoned at the top you see 'Howard Chaykin, Inc' and you go "Oh My God..." Suddenly, doing the sample pages became a lot more difficult. I'm amazed I got the job, to be honest, looking at the sample pages.

BL: The quality's picked up since then though, hasn't it?
ML: Oh yeah. The sample pages on American Century were pretty appalling, though, so Shelly must have had the confidence that it was just nerves or something.

BL: Gave you the job regardless.
ML: She could see something there that I couldn't see.

BL: Mmm. As I've asked her, a lot of people still see the editor as a traffic manager, but the job entails a lot more than that.
ML: Oh, definitely. When you first start on this sort of thing you have no idea what an editor does, they're just there to go through the script, but I



work very closely with Shelly on the breakdowns for the book and everything, she's as much part of the book as a guiding force as anybody else who works on it.

BL: You mention breakdowns; when the book was first solicited quite a fuss was made that breakdowns would be by Chaykin. Do you feel that detracted from your own presence on it?
ML: I was quite happy about it, to be honest, because for one thing you get to learn a lot. The things I was worried about when I started were that it was a monthly book, which is daunting enough, and you know what my work rate can be!

BL: Absolutely! We're going to cover this eventually. The past work will be dealt with, don't worry. But you're getting into the swing of a monthly?
ML: Oh yeah.
BL: 'Cause you're not actually contracted to do twelve issues a year, are you?
ML: No.
BL: People are asking "why isn't he doing every issue" but you're not down to do that?
ML: I'd love to be able to, but I think the book would suffer. I wouldn't be able to do the research that I do.

BL: There's an incredible amount of research involved in American Century, isn't there?
ML: Oh definitely, but that's down to what Howard and David put into the script. There've been occasions when they've specified the actual model of telephone that's sitting on somebody's desk, and if they're going to be that...
—
BL: Anal?
ML: ... Anal is one of the words, yes. 'Demanding'. If they're going to be that demanding you can't ignore it and just say "Well, here's a telephone", or "here's a radio". Because it's the small details that keep the book firmly rooted in the Fifties.

BL: Yeah! You can't have Harry flipping out a mobile, can you?
ML: Wouldn't really work. Especially as there'd be nothing broadcastable at that time.
BL: Yeah, go on, undercut the joke, why don't you?
ML: Pulling out a mobile or suddenly pulling out a ray gun or something. An M16 or something that hadn't been invented yet.

BL: It's a pain in the arse having to do all that research, surely?
ML: You know I've always loved doing research, which is one of the things that we made Six Degrees work on, the Victorian stuff was like, heavy research. But it's the sort of thing which does take up time. I can't speak for any of the other artists working on the book but I'm sure they equally found that element time-consuming.

BL: Okay, you've brought Six Degrees up. This is where we have to tell the reading public that we've worked together in the past.
ML: Yes.
BL: And that we've known each other for...
ML: Let's see, since 1990...
BL: Has it been that long?
ML: ... so twelve years.

BL: Don't seem a day too much. Six Degrees was the first attempt at a continuing book, wasn't it? And it lasted what, five issues?
ML: That wasn't down to our lethargy on the book, though.

BL: Good lord, no. Although outside...
ML: ... outside circumstances! I wouldn't get up in the morning and go "Ooh! I'm going to draw a page!"

BL: "Yay! And roughly fourteen people will look at it!"
ML: It wasn't that bad.

BL: No, it didn't do that bad. And despite the fact that we both thought Six Degrees was a fine bit of work, it was the other stuff we did that got more recognition. I take it we're not mentioning the Revolver Romance Special?
ML: Oh, you can do. I didn't get a great deal of work out of it, so it was a bit of a dead end. It didn't help that Revolver went bust, pretty quickly after I did work for them.

BL: So this is where DC starts to look financially shaky, then? We then did Gyre, which wasn't too bad, it won an award, but then lasted a shorter time than Six Degrees did...
ML: It was very much of a moment, though.

BL: Oh God, yeah.
ML: It was meant to be disposable and it was very disposable. But we got a better response for it and we got better sales but I think our hearts weren't in it, to be honest.

BL: Yeah, I'd agree with that. It wasn't the kind of thing we really wanted to do, was it?
ML: And when you're attempting to sell out I think you know it.

BL: You lose a certain edge. But, you know, thinking about it now while we're talking, the kind of flak we got for Six Degrees, which was about the murder of a child and was based fairly strongly around the notorious killing of James Bulger, people said we shouldn't do that sort of subject in a comic book, that was in a way a preparation, experience,

for the kind of thing you're doing with Howard and David on American Century. There's material in Century that people wouldn't have looked too kindly on, say, five, six years ago. It's incredibly violent in a very real manner...
ML: Howard's work always has been.

BL: With a very strong sexual content.
ML: I think Howard always has aimed at an adult audience, and let's face it, your average bit of TV does have violence, it does have sex, especially shows like *The Sopranos* and *Oz* which do have that kind of thing, and they do have snappy dialogue, and I think that's where Howard's always been coming from, that comicbook version of TV drama.

BL: Living up to the Vertigo standard of Mature Readers material.
ML: I would hope so. Obviously you're going to find an element of a sixteen-year-old's idea of what adult material should be, but that's because everybody has a large amount of sixteen-year-old in them!

BL: Well, yes! We wouldn't still be involved in this medium if there wasn't an amount of sixteen-year-old in us!
ML: Also, I think a lot of people find American Century odd because it isn't a typical Vertigo book.

BL: That's happening across the line at the moment.
ML: Yes, and it seems Vertigo is getting quite a lot of criticism for not being Sandman-centric or Preacher-centric. I think something really positive happened about a year and a half ago with the almost relaunch of the line. You saw books like Outlaw Nation, American Century and Codename: Knockout coming out, and it was almost like a new statement of intent, that it doesn't have to be all fantasy-based.

BL: There's still a strong element of fantasy, of course, with books like Lucifer and Midnight, Mass.
ML: The original idea was of diverse comics and I don't think they were necessarily doing that until this recent relaunch.

BL: The trouble is, I think, that everybody out there thinks a Vertigo book should be Sandman-ish or Preacher-ish, so when a book like Outlaw Nation comes out – which we both thought was a cracking book...
ML: Beautiful art, great story...

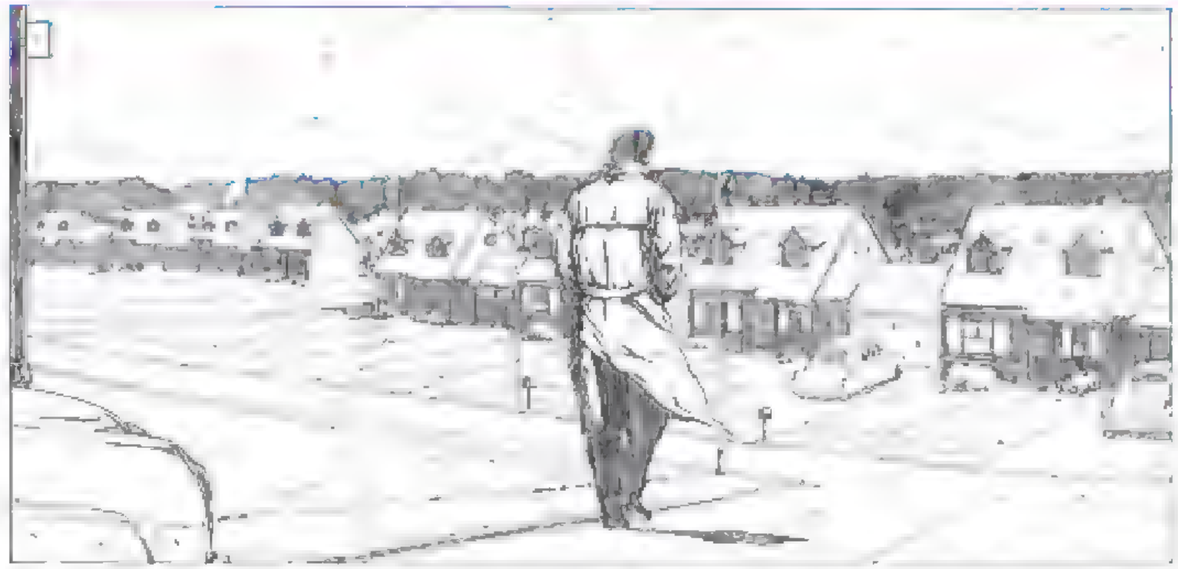
BL: Yes, but it didn't pick up the audience it needed.
ML: DeadEnders was another one. I think the reading audience expects certain things, that's why Marvel got all that criticism about what happened with X-Force when Pete Milligan and Mike Allred took over. It's selling well, but it lost some of its core readers.

BL: But does it need them? The ones it lost were the ones who expected it to be happy-happy superheroes for ever.
ML: And it's like with The Hulk, people are complaining that the Hulk isn't there, I think it's a better book for it.

BL: Going back to working methods: we were talking about breakdowns, what Howard does.
ML: What Howard does, he'd sent the script, and then with the script I'd get quite basic marker pen layouts, which would basically be egg-shaped heads and stick-men bodies, it was more to do with the composition of the panels than being something that I could stick down on the board and trace, which was the misconception a lot of people had. I'd get that from Howard, I'd draw up the page full size, on layout paper, roughly; and that would go on to the light box again to be drawn up, so it was quite a long process.

BL: A lot of people were expecting to see the archetypal Chaykin textured finishes and tones...
ML: Yeah, but I can't draw like Howard and Howard can't draw like me!

BL: I bet he wished he could though, doesn't he?
ML: Oh I'm sure he does. I bet he just beats himself up at night because he can't pull off those Laming pages.



BL: We've discussed other books in the Vertigo line, but what else are you reading these days?
ML: One of the perks of working for DC is I get a box with all of their regular titles once a month, and as a result I've been reading the Batman books, which is worrying...

BL: They've got some very good people working on them!
ML: I really enjoy them! But traditionally I haven't read superhero comics, or I haven't since I was sixteen.

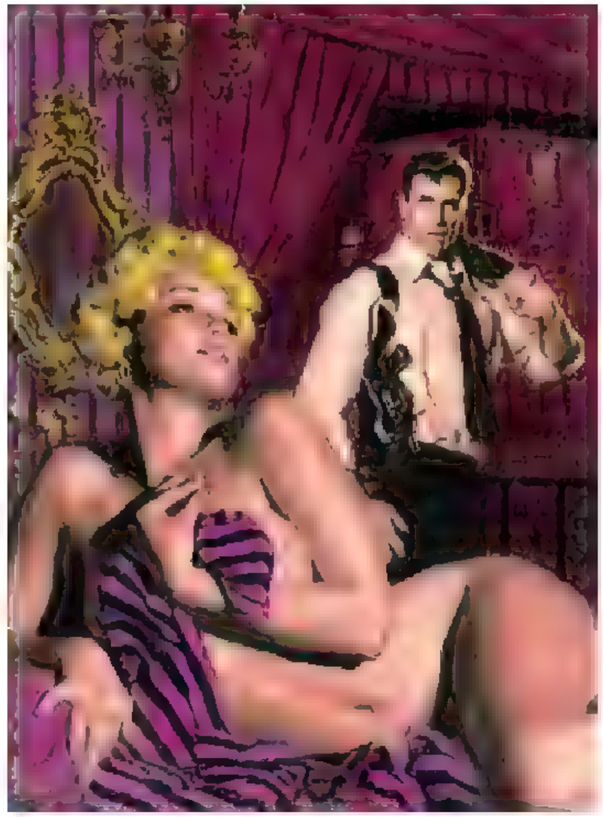
BL: You and I have had this ongoing feud about who started reading Cerebus first, haven't we?
ML: Oh yeah, again that would have been a pivotal moment, about the same time as Bill Sienkiewicz, possibly Cerebus #26 was the first one I picked up. The first part of *High Society*.

BL: You beat me by six months, my first was #32.
ML: It was just something that looked really cool, that I was browsing through in the comic shop, which was the first comic shop I'd been into, which was a thrill in itself. This was Forever People in Bristol. I'd go and visit my aunt in Bristol and I'd spend the whole week going through back issue boxes and looking at comics I couldn't afford.

BL: So you owe your entire career to your aunt?
ML: No, different aunt. You know, don't get on with the aunt, wander out for the day, you'd been foisted on them by your parents, so you'd spend the day in bookshops and then you find a comicbook shop.

BL: I've forgotten where we were...
ML: We could always go back to the laborious way I draw comicbooks.

BL: Yeah! We're talking to Justine Shaw elsewhere this issue, she does all of her stuff in the modern technical fashion, working it out in Photoshop, while you're still traditional pencils and inks on paper.



Jim Silke and Glen Orbik both recruited to paint pulp styled covers for American Century

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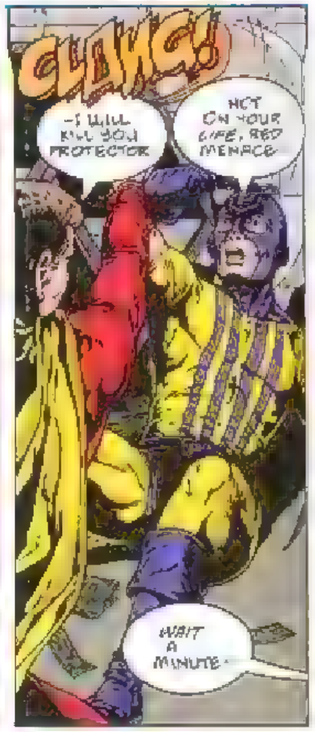

ML: Very traditional. Recently it hasn't been quite so because the pencils have been digitally inked by Digital Chameleon, but my actual work process is ridiculously complicated and very traditional. It starts with getting the script, reading that through, underlining the important parts, taking notice of Shelly's notes in the margins, whether she wants a certain panel layout or something added to the page. Then I'll do incredibly tiny breakdowns – about an inch by two inches – that way I can see the whole shape of the page at once, if you see what I mean. It's glaringly obvious from those if the page doesn't move. I take that, scan it, blow it up to A4, tighten it up. Then scan that, blow it up to actual size, put it on the light box and trace it off from there onto the board.

BL: Essentially you're drawing the same page four times. Digital Chameleon have worked on an issue or so; is there to be a change of inkers on the book?
ML: Oh no. We're going to continue using Digital Chameleon when we come up against deadline trouble, if I'm holding the book up with what I'm doing on it.

BL: Yeah, you can't leave it to John [Stokes, the series' regular inker]...
ML: ...You can't expect John to do a good job in a week.

BL: Can't argue with that. Chances are that some of those comics you were reading when you were a kid were things that John had been working on himself.
ML: Of course. I remember John's work from [the British weekly] Hulk Comic, which was one of the first comics I remember, I admired the *Black Knight*, it was one of my favourite strips in there.

BL: So you're working with John Stokes, whose work you admired, and you're working with Howard Chaykin, whose work you admired; does this give you a sense that you're, I don't know, carrying the banner, hoping you'll have the same effect on people who see your work?
ML: Ooh, I wouldn't want to give myself that much of a plaudit, do you know what I mean? I just think I've been incredibly lucky with the people I've got to work with, to be honest. It's alright getting applause, but it's the luck of the draw getting the work in the first place. I feel I've been, you know... Quite blessed!

BL: Sweet...
ML: Well, I've got an editor who I get on really well with, which is handy, even when she phones me up to have a go about being late. It makes life a lot easier. What do you want to talk about next?

BL: I've lost my list of questions. The bloody computer's gone to sleep.
ML: Oh, that's handy. Professional influences?

BL: Yeah, alright. We've covered the youthful influences, let's talk about the big boys, the ones you look up to today.
ML: I suppose I've got a very typical list of people that inspire me, very similar to a lot of other people. But it seems to be the older people who have the same list as me, if you see what I mean. Alex Toth is probably my favourite all-round comicbook artist, because he can really draw, and he can do so much with so little.

BL: The economy of line?
ML: And he can draw really good women as well, which is always important.

BL: Oh yes. The greats have always been the ones who know how to pare it down, know where to stop.
ML: Oh yes, definitely. But there's nothing wrong with detailed work. But it has to have some movement on the page, which is something that I'm struggling with, I must admit. Making sure it doesn't look too static. I loved the guy who did the first Human Target book, whose name I can't think of...

BL: Edvin Biukovic?
ML: Yes. The Pete Milligan Human Target series. That was absolutely beautiful, and again that was like a step on from what Alex Toth was doing.

BL: And it's a shame that we lost him so young.
ML: Yes, I think he could have completely rocked comics, given five years.

BL: We're seeing a lot of people coming from certain areas overseas, it's like the Philippino influx in the Sixties and Seventies...
ML: Alex Nino...

BL: People like that, we're seeing a lot of people from Eastern Europe, like the guys who did Outlaw Nation.
ML: I think it's fantastic stuff, I'm glad that the European stuff's coming through, because let's face it, all we were really seeing before in American comics, Heavy Metal was about the only place you saw things like Moebius, or Druillet or people like that, it was never really anything more than sci-fi stuff or sword and sorcery stuff, you didn't see the

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more serious stuff that was coming from Europe.

BL: It's the joy of modern technology. The same technology that lets you work with people in America lets them tap into the mainstream.
ML: Absolutely. You don't even have to speak the language.

BL: The almost instant exchange of information these days makes it far easier for people to work together over great distances. It's a good thing, is it not?
ML: Oh, I think so.

BL: What are you listening to this morning?
ML: I'm not telling you.

BL: Come on!
ML: *Queen 2.*

BL: Really? Bloody hell!
ML: I was just in the mood for it. Not the sort of thing I listen to all the time, but I thought "I haven't heard this for a while".

BL: Hmm. I think we part company when Queen enters the equation. What else you been listening to, then?
ML: New Bowie album. *Heathen.*

BL: Any good?
ML: Very good.

BL: We don't usually run music reviews, but just this once...
ML: Hawksley Workman's album, very good.

BL: Yeah?
ML: Yeah. Um... *The Pleasure Club*, James Hall's new album, very good.

BL: Never heard of 'em.
ML: Not a lot of people have.

BL: You say "new album", what's he done before?
ML: Three other albums and two Mary My Hope albums. Um... we've been getting a bit rambly.

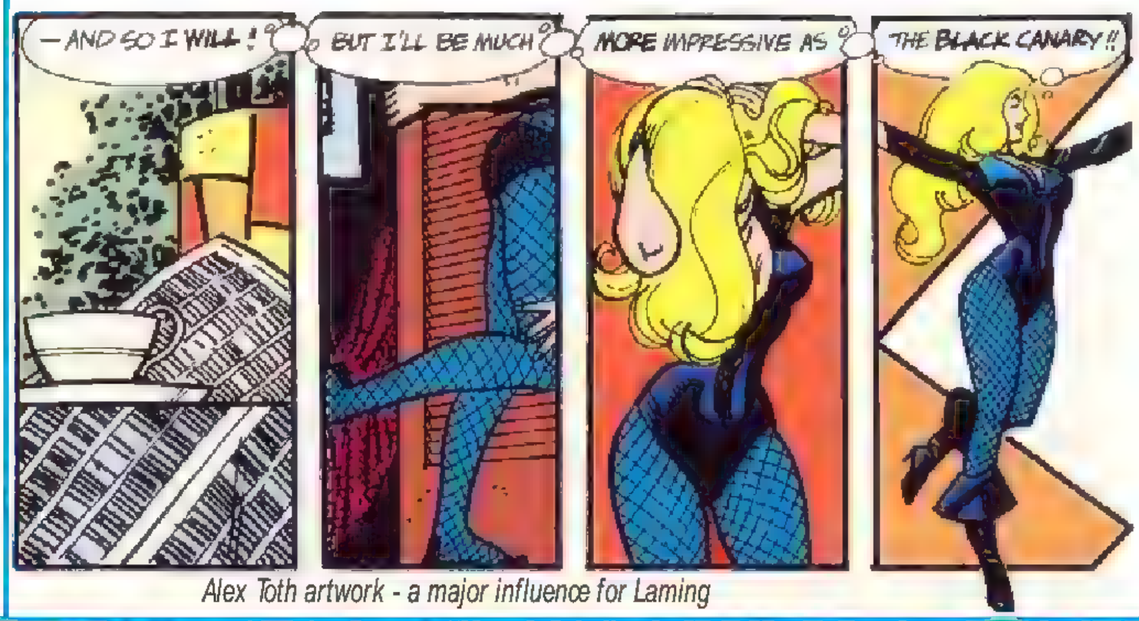
BL: That's alright, Phil'll cut it. [No, he won't! – Phil] *It'll be like those old* Comics Journal *interviews where Chris Claremont or someone would go on and on for twenty-five pages before they said anything interesting. So let's get in one last question and say; What do you really fancy doing? What's your ideal contribution to the medium?*
ML: Ooh... I'd love to do one long piece, rather than, say, working on a regular title, which has its drawbacks because you can't go into depth, I'd love to do a graphic novel of some sort.

BL: Long form?
ML: Yeah.

BL: Anybody you'd like to work with on that?
ML: Oh, there's plenty of writers I'd like to work with. I'd love to work with Pete Milligan at some point. I'm hopefully going to be working with Mike Carey in the future, I'd like to work with him. I'd love to do something longer with Howard at some point. The problem is, a lot of the things you'd like to work on, or think you'd like to work on because they're your favourite books, you wouldn't have the enjoyment of then reading.

BL: What if Marvel offered you Big Money to do a Spider-Man book?
ML: Would I do a Spider-Man book? I'm crap at drawing superheroes. Or I think I am. Personally I don't think I pull them off very well. That hyper-reality isn't something I do very well.

BL: Thank you for your time, and all that.
ML: That's alright, I've managed to get a lot of hair drawn while we've done this. Now I'm going to go and get a cup of tea.



Alex Toth artwork - a major influence for Laming

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Send your answers either by email to AC Comp: editorial@borderline.mediahall.co.uk
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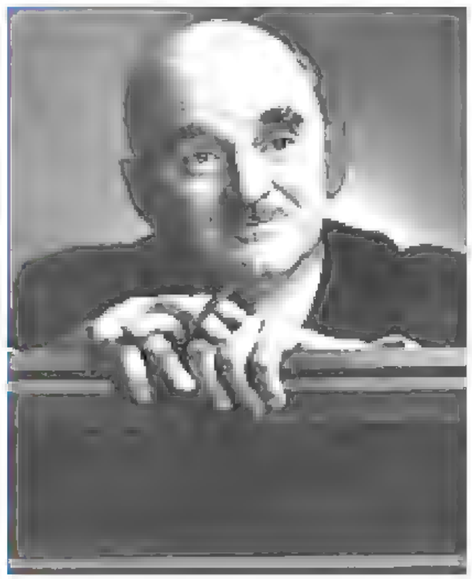
LOW SCALES THE HEIGHTS

As part of the Royal Golden Jubilee celebrations, a retrospective of the career of Sir David Low, perhaps the pre-eminent political cartoonist of the 20th Century, is running in London until October 2002.

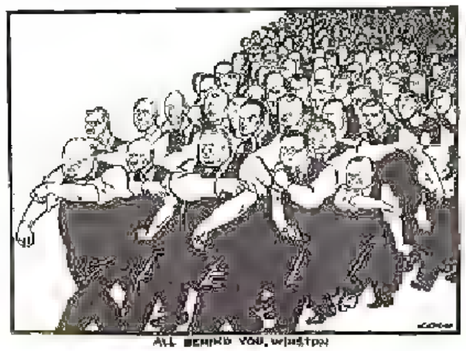


SIR David Low was born in New Zealand on the 7th of April 1891, the son of Scottish-Irish parents. Educated in Christchurch, he became interested in the art of caricature due to early exposure to English weekly comics like Comic Cuts, Chips, Ally Sloper's Half Holiday and Larks. Low took a correspondence course in caricature with a New York school, and later studied for a short spell at art school, but aside from that he was entirely self-taught. Apart from the UK weekly comics' early mainstay Tom Browne, he cited as influences Punch cartoonists such as John Keene, Edward Sambourne and Phil May, and earlier satirists including James Gillray, Honoré Daumier and caricaturist/publisher Charles Philipon.

Low was first published at the tender age of 11 in the Amalgamated Press weekly comic The Big Budget, and his first topical cartoon saw print in the Christchurch Spectator. He went on to be a regular competition winner in the Australian women's magazine *New Idea*, then found a niche producing police court drawings for New Zealand Truth. By 1908, he had become the Political Cartoonist for the Spectator, before moving to the Canterbury Times in 1910 and on to the Sydney Bulletin a year later. His best-selling book The Billy Book, which lampooned the Australian Prime Minister of the day, Billy Hughes, made the Antipodes too hot to hold him, and he moved permanently to England in August 1919.

To begin this new era, he adopted his trademark "Low" signature, instead of "Dave Low" as he had previously been signing his work. Low worked for The Star until 1927, when he moved to the Evening Standard, remaining there until 1950. He then moved to the Daily Herald, and in 1953 joined the Manchester Guardian. During his career, he also produced cartoons for magazines such as Punch, New Statesman, Picture Post, Ken, Graphic, Illustrated, Colliers, Nash's Magazine and others. He became a director of New Statesman, received honorary doctorates from the universities of New Brunswick, Canada (1958) and Leicester (1961), and in 1962 was given a knighthood. He died on 19th September 1963. A fuller account of his life may be found in the Dictionary of British Cartoonists and Caricaturists 1730-1980, compiled by Mark Bryant and Simon Heneage, published in 1994 by Scolar Press.

Widely regarded as the most influential of cartoonists during the 20th century, Low produced 14,000 or more drawings during his 50 year career, syndicated to more than 200 newspapers and magazines across the world. He created memorable characters such as the Coalition Ass, Musso the Pup, the TUC Carthorse and perhaps his most famous creation, the walrus-moustached Colonel Blimp, immortalised in the Powell and Pressburger film *The Life And Death Of Colonel Blimp* and in dictionaries as a definition of any type of elderly reactionary in a position of authority, such as a government official, or especially an army officer. He published 29 books between Low's Annual in 1908 and The Fearful Fifties in 1960. Winston Churchill described Low as "a green-eyed young Antipodean radical", and attempted to ban the *Colonel Blimp* film. Low preferred to describe himself as "a nuisance dedicated to sanity."



Labour MP Tony Banks, Chairman of the House of Commons Committee on Works of Art and a keen collector of political cartoons himself, commented at the launch of the current exhibition: "Low was a prime example of how cartoonists could be both true artists and significant political commentators," and continued, "He was exposing the evils of fascism and Nazism when people around this place [Parliament] - and in the newspapers - were ignorant of their menace." Banks was referring to the almost daily attacks and ridicule that Low heaped upon Hitler and Mussolini in the Evening Standard, at a time when nobody else would speak. Some of the Low originals on display in the exhibition are on loan from Parliament's own collection. Many of Low's most famous pieces are featured, including "*All behind you, Winston*", depicting the 1940 wartime coalition government rolling up their sleeves and falling in step with Churchill.

Co-sponsored by *BBC History Magazine* and the Political Cartoon Society, Low: The 20th Century's Greatest Cartoonist will run until to October 31 2002 at Westminster Hall, Palace of Westminster, London SW1A 1AA - appropriately enough, formerly the offices of so many of Low's targets.

The exhibition features 110 of Low's works, focusing on British party politics during the last century. Beginning with the 1922 General Election which brought down Lloyd George's coalition, it covers the inter-war period, 1936's abdication crisis, Appeasement and the rise of Hitler and Mussolini, the Second World War and the post-war period, and ends with Edward Heath's attempts in 1963 to negotiate entry for Britain to the EEC. A catalogue will be on sale at the exhibition, containing reproductions of every illustration.

Admission to Low: The 20th Century's Greatest Cartoonist is free to the general public.

Opening Times:
Until 2nd August: 9am to 1pm Mon to Thurs; 9am to 5pm Fri
3rd August to 28th September: 9am to 6pm Mon to Sat & Sun 22nd September
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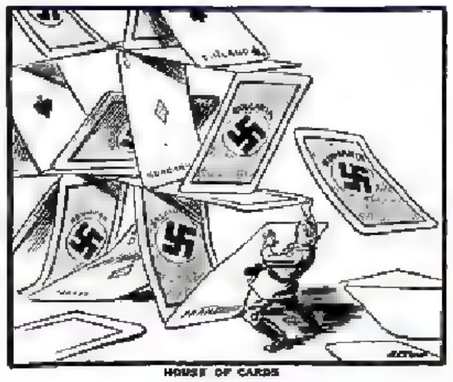


"DANTE'S INFERNO WITH DICK JOKES..."

THAT'S how Andy Winter describes his first self-published graphic novel, Devilchild. The debut from the writer's own Indy publishing concern, Moonface Press, it tells the blackly comic tale of a decidedly reluctant Antichrist, his bizarre extended family and Hell's first general election. Borderline's resident hellcat Carol Close took a trip into Essex's stygian depths, keeping her claws withdrawn in order to get some straight answers from the author...

Carol Close: For anyone who hasn't heard of Devilchild, what's it about?
Andy Winter: Simply put, it's about a terribly ordinary guy who discovers that Satan is his dad and that his two best friends have kept it from him for 16 years. It's a bawdy British black comedy with violence, blasphemy and a fair bit of "industrial language". Someone described it as a "harder-edged urban version of *Buffy*", which is a description I love, as it's certainly influenced by Joss Whedon's stuff. Although, obviously, you rarely get to hear Sarah Michelle Gellar swear like a refugee from an Irvine Welsh novel!

CC: What other stuff influenced Devilchild?
AW: Dante's Divine Comedy was a fairly big influence – a lot of the names of characters and places in the graphic novel are taken directly from it. Beyond that, TV shows like *South Park*, comics like Love & Rockets, and novelists like Martin Millar. Millar's really underrated. He has this great way of combining the utterly commonplace with the totally extraordinary in a way that no-one else I've read comes close to matching - one minute you can be reading about signing on, squatters and playing in a band and the next it's all fairies, demigods and werewolves! His Dreams Of Sex & Stage Diving is one of my favourite books - it's a totally rock 'n' roll experience and that's the kind of full on, take no prisoners vibe I'm trying to emulate in my comics writing.

CC: What about the subject matter - hasn't all that devil and Antichrist thing been done to death?
AW: Yeah, it has, but then what hasn't? The mafia had been done to death and along came *The Sopranos*, vampires had been done to death then along came *Ultraviolet* and *Buffy*. Now, I'm not arrogant enough to compare my writing talents to those of Joss Whedon and David Chase, but hopefully I've introduced a few new ideas into that hackneyed old Hell/Heaven/Antichrist mythos that haven't really been explored before in comics or film.

CC: Would you say that creators self-publish purely out of vanity?
AW: No, I've always thought that that was a bullshit argument propagated by those too dim to engage with anything other than the mainstream. I like the control self-publishing gives you, I like the independence and I've always been a great believer in that DIY punk ethic. I enjoy creating something entirely on my own terms, financed with my own money, that doesn't have to go through a committee of editors and publishers before it sees the light of day. That isn't to say I'd turn down paid work in the comics industry, but I'm pretty happy as I am right now.

CC: Surely there must be characters that are owned by Marvel, DC and other comics publishers that you'd love the chance to write...
AW: Well, I'd really like to write a Morbius The Living Vampire story for [Devilchild artist] Natalie Sandells to draw, and I've always had a thing for Ghost Rider. Other than that, there was a story in the old UK weekly, Action, called *Kids Rule OK*. It was pointlessly violent, unpleasant and nihilistic - and hastily removed from the comic after about five issues, never to return. The hours of sick, twisted fun I could have updating that doesn't even bear thinking about!

CC: Does Moonface Press have plans to publish graphic novels apart from those concerned with Devilchild?

AW: Not in the short term. Right now, Moonface mostly exists to showcase the work of Natalie and myself. I have a shed-load of ideas for stories and characters beyond Devilchild and would also love, at some point, to publish an anthology featuring work by other British comics writers. But all that's in the future.

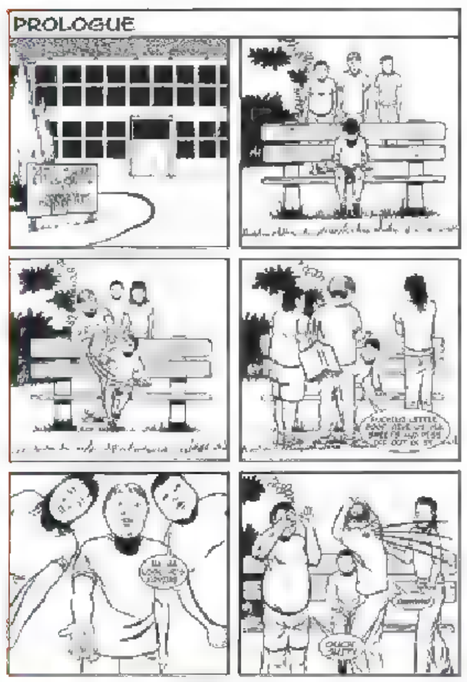
CC: There's a lot of humour in Devilchild - do you see yourself first and foremost as a comedy writer?
AW: Yeah, definitely, which surprises me, as that wasn't really the intention when I first started writing it. It just came out that way, it seemed to work and now I think I'd struggle to write a genuinely "serious" scene without sticking in a couple of one liners. I think the best comics have a healthy sense of their own absurdity and that's a tradition I'm more than willing to uphold.

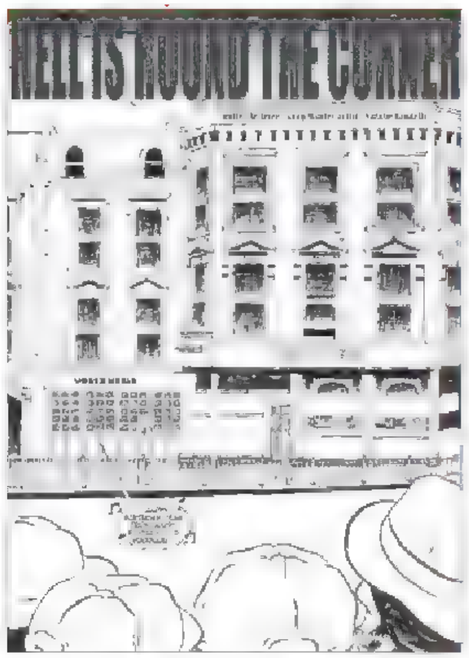
CC: How many more volumes of Devilchild are planned?
AW: I'm writing Devilchild II at the moment, which is mostly set in Heaven and should be out next year - hopefully in time for Comics 2003. I have a lot of ideas for further volumes after that but there's nothing concrete yet.

CC: Although most of the attention so far has focused on Devilchild,

there are actually three other stories in the graphic novel. What can you tell us about them?
AW: *Velocity Girl* is a satire on superheroes, celebrity and right-wing politics. The artist on it is a Brit called Tim Twelves, who lives in California. I really enjoy writing *Velocity Girl* as it gives me the chance to have a go at some of the things that annoy me about England, so there will definitely be another VG story in Volume II as I have a lot of bile saved up. *Dosh & Pecs Do Time Travel* is a piss-take of David Beckham and Posh Spice in a *Tharg's Future Shocks*-type setting. PeeT! Clack draws that. Finally, there's a story called *Feathers*, which is a total change of pace. It's almost completely silent and done for the most part as a nine-panel grid. It's a "twist in the tale" type thing drawn by Tim Doe.

CC: If you could work with any





comic artist, living or dead, who would you choose?
AW: Easy. I'd love to see a *Velocity Girl* story drawn by Carmine Infantino, and would sell my soul to Cilla Black to have Gene Colan work on Devilchild.

CC: There are lots of apocryphal stories about "satanic happenings" during the filming of The Omen *and the recording of Iron Maiden's* Number Of The Beast *album. Did anything scary or strange happen during the production of Devilchild?*
AW: No, Satan's one of our biggest fans actually. Natalie and I are even having lunch with him next week - he's pitching us an idea he's got for a six-issue miniseries about caravanning in the Lake District.

Devilchild, price £7.99, is available in comic shops through Red Route (ISBN 0954273907), from www.amazon.co.uk or direct from Moonface Press – go to www.devil-child.co.uk for details.

DAMMIT JIM - I'M A WRITER, NOT A FORTUNE TELLER!

PETER DAVID, the comics luminary responsible for catapulting Incredible Hulk high up on the sales charts, has been making his opinions known – and he's not a man to do it quietly! First off, he challenged Marvel to delay an expected price rise on his current title, Captain Marvel – and succeeded. Then he expounded his latest theory about the future of American comics. Borderline news editor Mike Sivier caught up with Peter to discuss these weighty issues.

Borderline: I know your words have been made public elsewhere, but could you please restate your opinion on how comics must evolve?
Peter David: The opinion I put forward was that the current 22-page pamphlet style of comics is acquiring such a sizable price tag that it's on the way to becoming obsolete.

That it's going to reach the price point where more and more people just say, "Enough."

And that it would probably be wise for publishers to start phasing that format out and replace it with higher page count titles in slicker packages.

Comics are approaching $3.00 for the average 22-page book. I doubt many people will buy that. But $3.25 for a perfect-bound 32- or 48-page book on slick paper, yeah, I think people would be more inclined to try that.

BL: How did you come around to your current way of thinking?
PD: When I was in Paris and Italy and saw how popular album-style comics were.

BL: Why do you think anthologising US comics would be a good idea after decades in which single strips managed on their own?
PD: Because I think single strips are pricing themselves out of viability.

BL: How do you see such a plan working? It means some people would be buying a $3.50 title for just one of the featured strips, and they might not think it's a worthwhile purchase.
PD: Well, ideally if they're spending the money, they'll endeavor to *get* interested in the other strips. Then it's up to the strip creators to make it as good as possible. Also you'd want to tailor the strips to go together.

It's no different than on television, trying to schedule shows that complement each other.

BL: Do you think the future you perceive is likely to come about soon? What might happen if it doesn't?
PD: Haven't a clue. Dammit, Jim, I'm a writer, not a fortune teller.

BL: Comics produced in other areas of the world are succeeding - look at Brazil - when the US product is diminishing (or showing a slight upturn, depending on who you read); why do you think this is? And what could be done to improve the standing of the US (or, for that matter, British) product?
PD: Part of it is derived from the US mindset that comics are purely kiddie fodder, and overpriced kiddie fodder at that. Serious hammering at the notion that comics aren't just for kids is almost mandatory.

BL: Dare I ask what you think of the US comicbook publicity machine after the big Captain Marvel debate of a month or so ago? It seemed, to me, to start with a legitimate complaint and then turned into a circus for Marvel to publicise itself.

(Peter's challenge to Marvel over the pricing of his title led to a return challenge from company president Bill Jemas. He said he would create a new title, The Marvel, which would run for at least six months, alongside Captain Marvel and the rest of the company's line. At the end of that half-year period, whichever comic was selling the least would be cancelled. The Marvel *has yet to appear.)*
PD: I ignited this free-for-all for two reasons: to keep the price down on the book and to get some PR for Captain Marvel. Since I've accomplished both, I don't think I have real grounds to complain.

Granted, the *style* of publicity it has gotten is somewhat over the top, but in the words of Superchicken, I knew the job was dangerous when I took it.

THE AXEMAN COMETH

In the city of Piranesi, in an alehouse known as The Hobbit's Armpit, Borderline's Jay Eales shared a pint of Panther Sweat with Carl Critchlow to celebrate his self-publishing debut.

WITH *The Lord of the Rings* set to keep the fantasy genre popular for the next few years, and Terry Pratchett's **Discworld** series continuing to top the book charts, Carl Critchlow couldn't have picked a better time to bring his psychopathic Conan-alike Thrud back into the spotlight, with the release of **Thrud the Barbarian** #1.

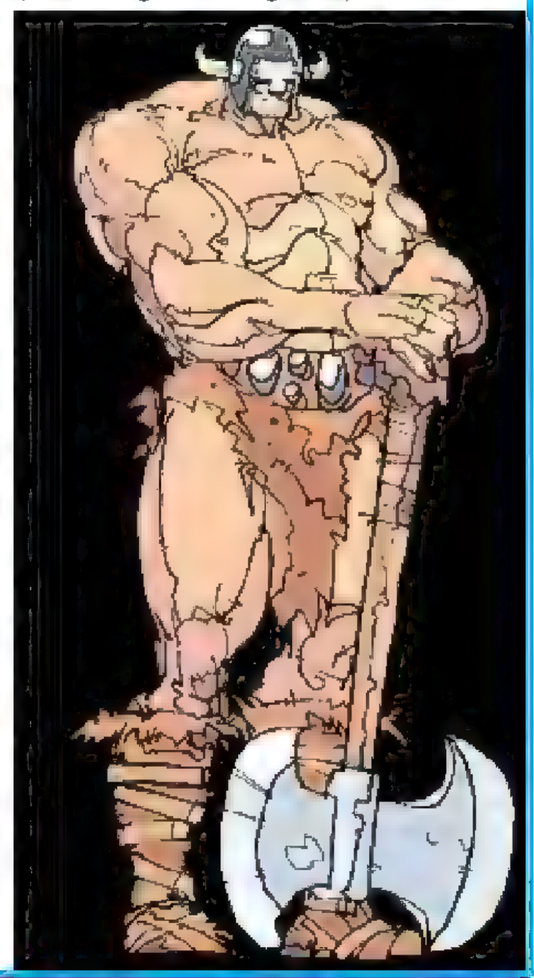
Born in Liverpool in 1963, Carl Critchlow was inspired to take up art as a career when he won a painting competition organised in Lancashire by Sayers, a chain of bakers. While at art college in Preston, Critchlow found himself under the tutelage of Bryan Talbot (interviewed at length in **Borderline** #1), who opened the youngster's eyes to a world of comics outside the spandex brigade. Inspired by the likes of Frank Frazetta, Berni Wrightson, Arthur Suydam, Vaughn Bodé and Dave Sim, Critchlow started to produce his own comic strips, and on a grey 1981 day, Thrud the Barbarian sprang fully-formed from the page, initially appearing in fanzines, most notably **Arkensword**.

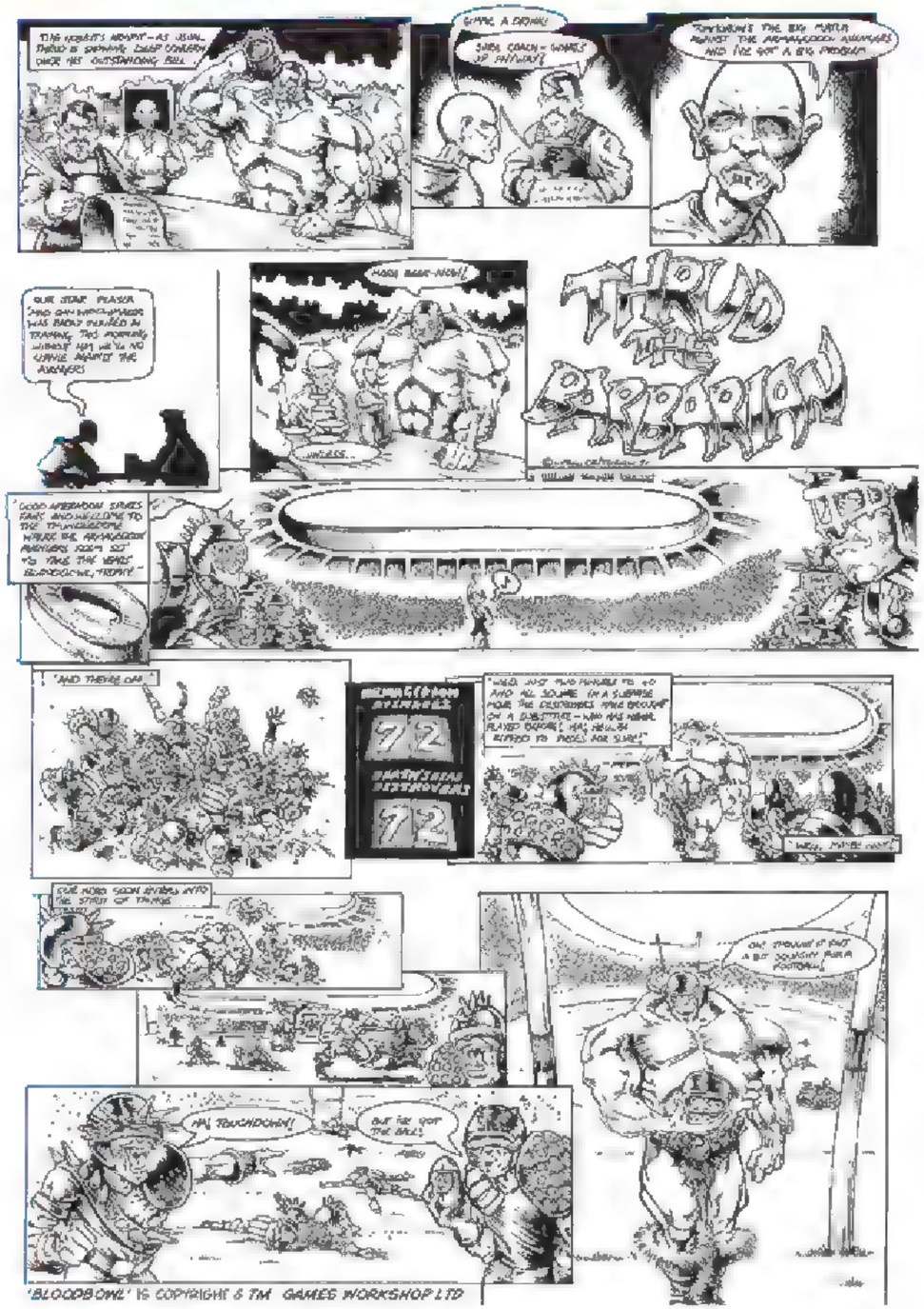
Critchlow moved back to Liverpool and, while at art college, teamed up with fellow artist Euan Smith on a 'zine called **Dead 'Ard**. Its 32 pages featured a 2 page *Thrud* strip, and a related 4-pager entitled *The Black Currant*, which would later see print again in **Warrior**. While aimlessly flicking through a friend's copy of the Games Workshop roleplaying game magazine **White Dwarf**, Critchlow spotted a house advertisement for cartoonists, and sent some samples of his most recent work, featuring the pinheaded barbarian psycho.

White Dwarf leapt at the strip, and *Thrud* found a home in its pages for many years, nestling alongside strips such as Mark Harrison's *The Travellers* and Nik's *Gobbledigook*. For three years in a row, *Thrud* was voted the magazine's most popular feature. Games Workshop capitalised on the popularity with Thrud badges, t-shirts and even a limited edition metal miniature, culminating in 1987 with a 48-page reprint collection of past strips, called the **Thrud the Barbarian Graffik Novel**. It's been long out of print, so Thrudaholics will be pleased to know that Critchlow intends to make many of Thrud's earliest appearances available on the Thrud website, with a new strip appearing each month. At present, there's an opportunity to compare an early Thrud strip with a panel for panel retelling in Critchlow's current style.

Speaking about a recent issue of **Borderline**, Critchlow commented: "I was very interested to see the Polish comics feature [in **Borderline** #11] – some Polish RPG magazine has been reprinting *Thrud* without permission - swines!"

On the subject of why he decided to bring back the barbarian nutter now, rather than earlier, Critchlow explained: "I have always meant to develop the character further. It's only been possible to do this myself (colouring, lettering, etc.) since I




THE HOBBIT'S ARMPIT - AS USUAL THRUD IS SHOWING DEEP CONCERN OVER HIS OUTSTANDING BAR BILL...
GIMME A DRINK!
SURE COACH - WHAT'S UP ANYWAY?
TOMORROW'S THE BIG MATCH AGAINST THE ARMAGEDDON AVENGERS AND I'VE GOT A BIG PROBLEM...
OUR STAR PLAYER, HEAD BAN WRECKMAKER HAS BADLY INJURED HIS KNEE IN TRAINING THIS MORNING WITHOUT HIM WE'VE NO CHANCE AGAINST THE AVENGERS!
MORE BEER!
THRUD THE BARBARIAN
GOOD AFTERNOON SPORTS FANS, AND WELCOME TO THE THUNDERDOME WHERE THE ARMAGEDDON AVENGERS SEEK YET TO TAKE THE YEARS BLOODBOWL TROPHY!
AND THEY'RE OFF!
ARMAGEDDON AVENGERS 4
DEATHSHEAD DESTROYERS 4
DARKHEAD SOON ENTERS INTO THE SPIRIT OF THINGS
I THOUGHT IT FELT A BIT SQUISHY FOR A FOOTBALL...
HA! TOUCHDOWN!
BUT I'VE GOT THE BALL!
'BLOODBOWL' IS COPYRIGHT & TM GAMES WORKSHOP LTD

got the Mac and even then it's taken a couple of years to find enough time.

"I've decided to self-publish in order to keep as much control as possible over the character. This style of working is a slight departure from my usual approach so it's a showcase/experiment too! Back in the 80s the Thrud strips were typical of my work at the time - somehow those dicey black and white drawings seem to do the job - but *hopefully* I've refined the [black and white] style since. There are some old favourite characters in there and some new - I want to move the character on but also to rekindle some interest from old fans."

Another reason for going the self-publishing route is the creative control it affords him: "I love drawing comics but I much prefer having control over the way the finished product looks – see *Thrud* for details."

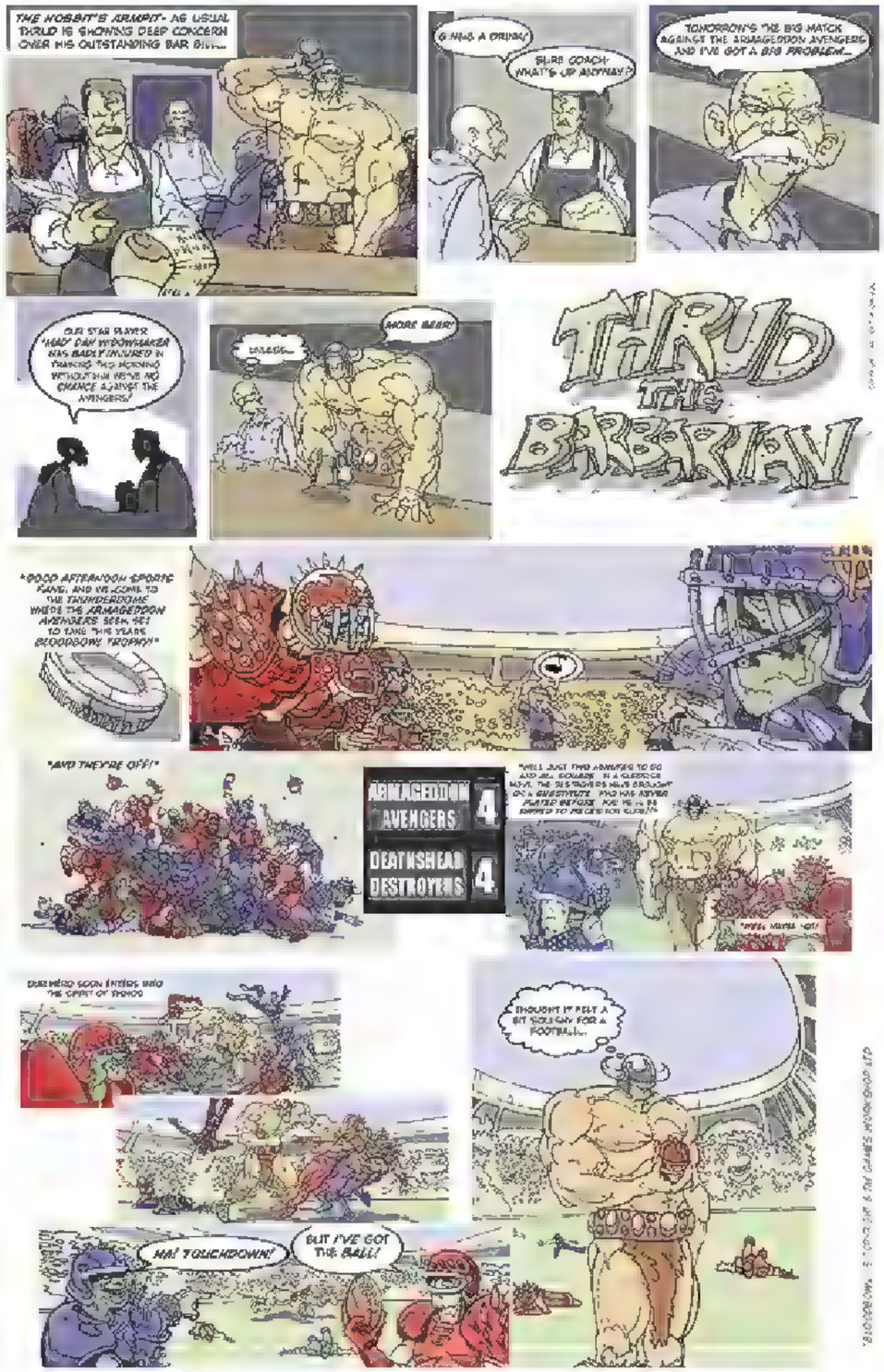
Aside from *Thrud*, Critchlow has worked on numerous other projects over the years. For **2000AD** and the **Judge Dredd Megazine** Critchlow illustrated *Flesh: The Legend of Shamana*, *Nemesis & Deadlock*, *Future Shocks*, *Tales of Telguuth* and *Son Of Mean Machine*, plus the Fleetway/DC Comics crossover: **Batman/ Judge Dredd 3: The Ultimate Riddle**, where he shared art duties with Dermot Power. Also for DC, he pencilled issues of the monthly **Lobo** series, covers for **Shadow of the Bat**, and painted Joker cards for the *Batman Master Series* trading card set. For the last few years, players of Wizards of the Coast's *Magic: The Gathering* trading card game have been looking at Critchlow's paintings and illustration work.

Visit Carl on the web at *www.carlcritchlow.com* and *www.thrudthebarbarian.com*

Launched at Comics 2002 in June, issue 1 of **Thrud the Barbarian** is available for purchase direct from the author for £2.60 (including postage) at: P.O. Box 371, Southport PR8 6YE, United Kingdom. International orders and retailer enquiries should be directed to: *info@thrudthebarbarian.com*

Thrud the Barbarian #2 is tentatively scheduled for autumn publication, 24 pages long with full colour throughout.

An artist redefining himself? Carl Critchlow's Thrud the Barbarian from the dim and distant past and the same strip in a 2002 stylee.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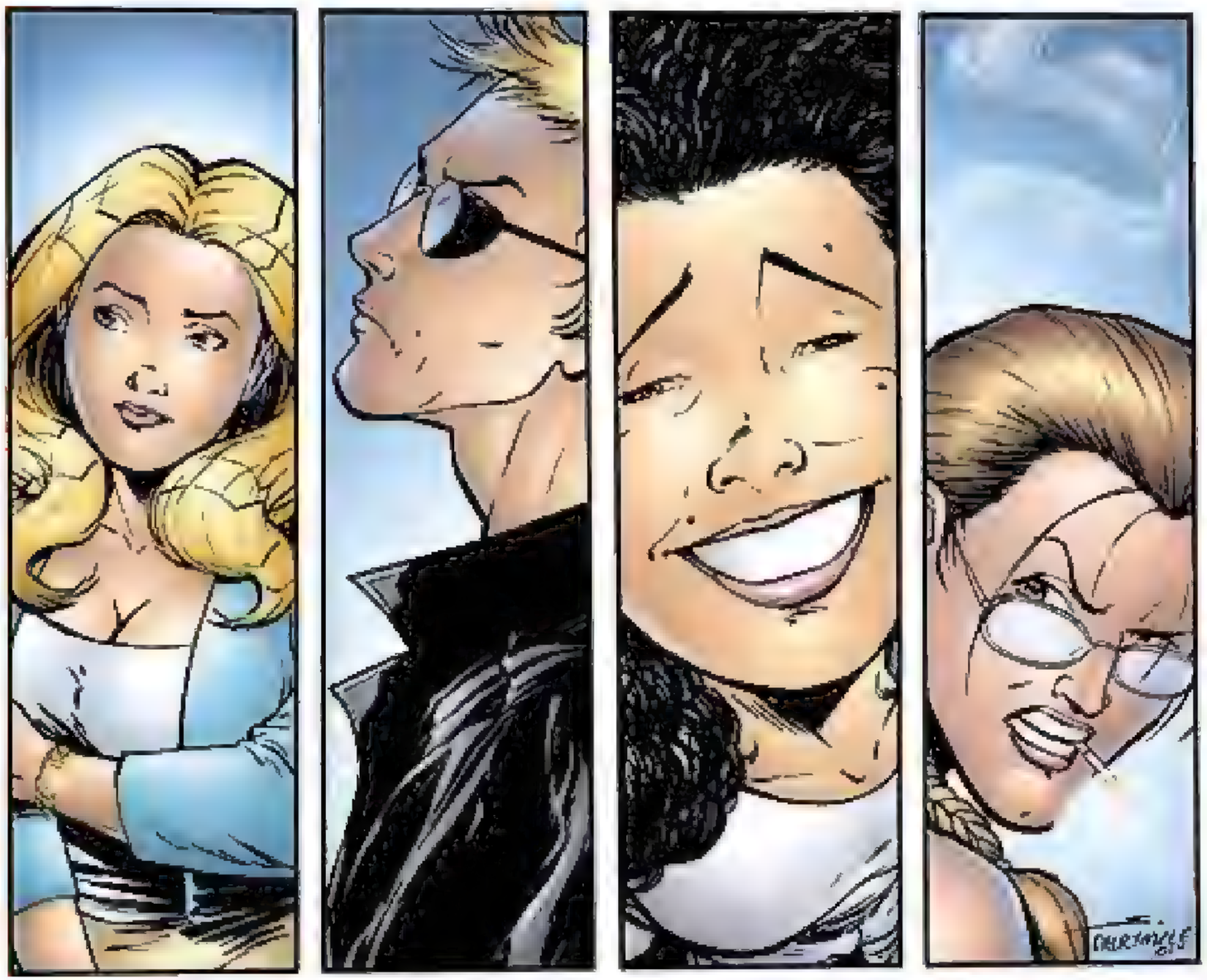
BUT I'VE GOT THE BALL!

NOT FADE AWAY

Borderline attempts to track down the most diverse and original comics stories currently available from your local comic store (if you're lucky) or on the Internet. Editor, Phil Hall, found himself impressed on a number of levels by Myatt Murphy and Scott Dalrymple's impressive Fade From Blue. Here's the resulting conversation...



MENTION to most spandex fans that there's some guy writing a comicbook about four sisters, and Joe Spandex would probably be either very sceptical of the guy's ability to correctly "voice" his female characters or he might think the book would be full of tits and ass and as much female flesh as is physically possible.

So it's something of a refreshing change to come across a comicbook about women produced by males that doesn't make the reader feel like they're intruding into some adolescent wank fantasy. But the true mark of Fade From Blue's difference is its price. This is a comic that launched for $1.00 and is increasing in price, for the duration of the first story arc at least, to the utterly enticing $1.50. In today's market this is a title that anyone can afford to speculate on - and when I say "speculate", I don't mean as a long term investment; I mean as an intellectual investment.

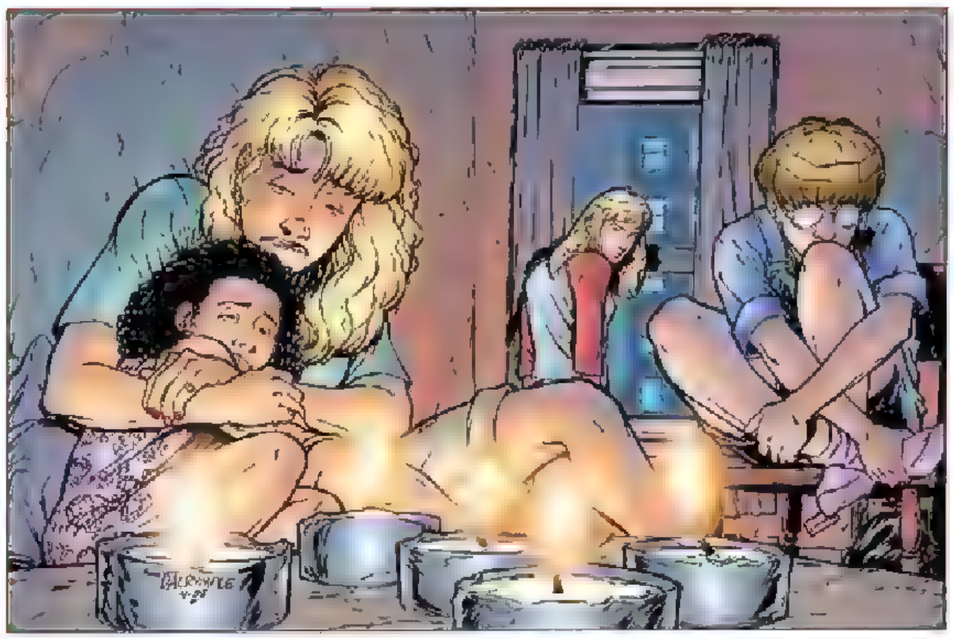
Fade From Blue introduces the reader to four sisters who share the same father, but different mothers, in different countries. Their father is a top spy and is obviously hot and wanted property, but the girls are essentially kids trying to live their lives and it's fairly obvious that they are eventually going to get involved in something to do with their errant father. Myatt Murphy is the writer behind this unusual comicbook concept; he's also the driving force behind the decision to make the comic easily accessible to the comics-buying public.

One of the first things people noticed about Fade From Blue was the fluidity of the characterisation, which led to people suspecting that Myatt was a woman. "No, I'm a guy," he says. "I'm a magazine writer here in the States, who does a lot of relationship column stuff (just like the main character of the story, Christa) for magazines like Glamour, Cosmo, Maxim, etc., so I'm used to writing for both a male and female audience. In fact, in the June issue of Cosmopolitan here in the States you'll see the latest article I've written, which includes the names of several characters from the comic book that I managed to sneak in - Derek, Jay and Trevor, who you'll meet in issue 2".

> *We wanted to get the book into the hands of as many people as possible.*

Murphy continues, "The truth is, I've been writing for women (and men) for years. Here in the States, and in your country as well where many of my magazine articles are reprinted in Cosmopolitan, I'm asked to write for women's magazines about sex, relationships and personal issues. Sometimes these articles are taken from a

IN FACT, YOU KNOW WHAT? WE EVEN HAVE THE SAME BIRTHDAY. ISN'T THAT WILD? I MEAN, OUT OF THE FEW PEOPLE IN OUR CLASS, CAN YOU BELIEVE THAT? I REALLY THINK IT'S DESTINY.
OHHHHH MY GOD, I'M FACE-MOLDED LITTLE GIRL



"guy's" perspective, while other times, I've written gear guides for magazines in the States where I've had women testers trying on sports bras, shoes, etc., then I take their insights and write features describing why a certain product is ideal for a woman.

"In other words, listening to women and writing about their perspective is what I do often. My hope with Fade is to be able to have that same kind of ability come out in my fiction. So far, the response has been thankfully overwhelming that I'm doing it right... but trust me, not an issue of Fade will be printed that doesn't go through the scrutiny of several female friends, to make sure I'm not throwing something out that's implausible.

"I'm hoping that my experience in writing for both men and women will allow me to write a series that merges the two styles into one so both can enjoy it. But I leave our degree of succeeding in that venture in the hands of yourself, reviewers and the readers... hopefully, we won't ever let you [all] down."

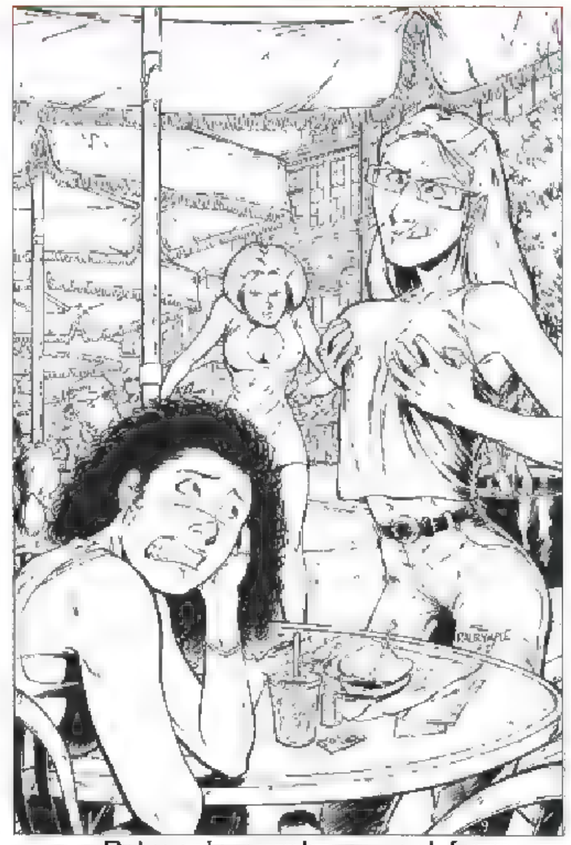
There appear to be some positive responses to the initial issue already: "At the Philly show (WizardWorld), we had so many women, just tagging along with their boyfriends, husbands, etc., come up after reading Fade From Blue #1 looking for issue #2. It felt as if Fade From Blue #1 had broken down the excuse in their minds that 'comic books weren't for them'".

Fade From Blue was something Murphy developed from an earlier collaboration with Scott Dalrymple, the series artist. "The idea came from our first mini-series Two Over Ten which came out last November. It was dark fiction, which has its own audience, but the back-up story was a sarcastic, playful series called *Far From Saints*, about a guy who joins a bunch of losers that represent God. We had so many people (both men and women) enjoy that story that we thought we should do another book with more humor that was reality-based. I'm a big fan of gender-neutral books like The Waiting Place, Strangers in Paradise, Ghost World and anything manga so we decided to create a book that wouldn't have any labels on it so that everyone could enjoy it."

Fade From Blue's big selling point, as far as gaining retailer confidence is concerned, is the price. Murphy's reasons for this are refreshing, lacking in greed and worthy of being noted by many of the publishers out there. "We're only raising it to $1.50 after #1. There will be no further price increases and should we decide to trade paperback the series, it will be at half the usual price as well.

"Why? Because we wanted to get the book into the hands of as many people as possible. It's also hard to complain about high comic prices the moment you become a publisher. We thought that instead of complaining to companies, we would try to set an example that, if sales continue to be good as they have been over the past two weeks since its release, might get other companies to drop prices.

"Surely we must be mad, stupid or rich, right? The truth is that we knew we were about to create a series that we hoped would pull readers (including women) that weren't typically into comic books at all. That meant we would be asking them to understand that comic books are now $2.75-$2.95 (a fact that even we as comic book readers don't understand or accept most of the time). It's also easy to complain about the higher prices of comics as a reader... But when you're a publisher and in the position to evoke a change, to 'not' do anything about the price and still bitch about high prices makes you a hypocrite... That's when we decided to try something we would feel more comfortable with. We were pricing this around the time the Batman: 10-cent Adventure sales hit the market. I think



Batman's numbers went from 40,000 at $2 to 800,000 for a 10-cent book (and understandably so). Well, do the maths. Scott and I talked about cutting the price in half. When we ran the numbers, it wasn't as much of a loss (literally a few hundred dollars each issue) to lower the price to hopefully sell twice as many.

"We just ran out of our entire first printing of Fade From Blue #1 (5,000 copies) and have a second printing rolling now. The $1.00 Price sold more than three times what we

YOU'LL NEVER STOP NEEDIN' TO LOVE, SUGAR...
...BUT AIN'T YOU? FALLIN' THEM BY THEM NOT NEEDIN' YOU NO MORE.
NOT IF THEY GREW UP WITH THEIR NOSE OUTTA TROUBLE

would have if we'd kept it at $2.75. Sticking with the standard price would have meant 4,000 people wouldn't have read our book... And that's really what it's all about for us".

Another impressive fact about this series is that Fade From Blue is pencilled and written up to #8 and inked up to issue #3, which means that the book will ship when the creators say it will.

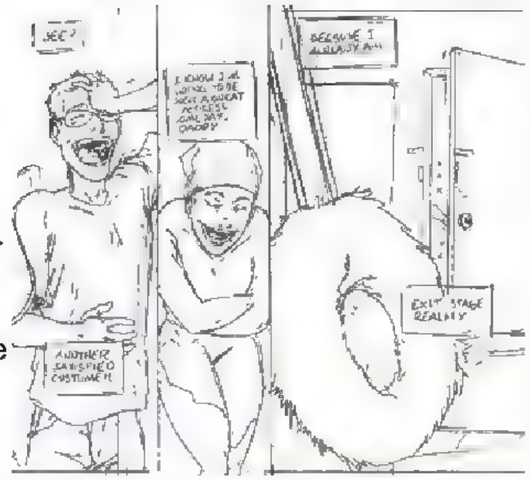
When the comics press received previews of the series, they included photocopies of the finished first issue – it had a page missing. What was the score behind this? "When we sent the preview out, I hadn't had the rest of the issue Quarked yet. The art has the words attached to it, so copying it on machine to send out copies was easy... However, since we were still playing with the design on the letters page, and the ads, we didn't want to print out something we might not use in the final version."

SAY, STUD! WHAT ABOUT YOU? COME HERE OFTEN? WANT TO TICKLE MY TONSILS BACK BY THE BLOOD SAMPLES AFTER THEY TAKE A THROAT CULTURE?
XXXXL
PLEASE DON'T HURT ME.

Another nagging question for the press has been how these two – rather like Borderline! - are making any money from the project. "With the same sacrifice and dedication that most comic book self-publishers use. Neither of us is independently wealthy (just ask my accountant) but I've managed to sell off a lot of comic books I used to collect as a kid to get the ball rolling. Scott is paid for his work, so he's not losing anything at this stage... And we're paid through issue #7 so far, with conventions and signing sales really drawing funds in, assuring that this series is going until there are no more stories for us to tell."

One of the strengths of the series is Dalrymple's extremely strong art. Not bad for a newcomer, but there's argument over where his influences come from. "Scott's work is an enigma to every artist we've met, which is why I love his style and hope that others will appreciate it as much as I do. Just when I start seeing one artist in his work, it disappears... But I think he's fortunately been allowed to discover 'his' style on his own, unlike most artists who may break into the mainstream and have to imitate another artist's style for years until they are successful enough to stretch their wings.

"With Scott, I just let his style take over and pick projects that I think mesh best with it as it evolves. Hopefully, my writing is complementing his style and not holding it back... I never know what's going to come out of his head next. He would be absolutely thrilled to work out something with you... You have never met a more humble and good-natured person in the business, I can guarantee it. I feel like Satan in his presence and I'm a nice guy!"



Fade From Blue may be a series featuring four strong female characters, but every review so far has called it a great read for both men and women alike. It's written like a TV show, for both genders and an age range from 16+ on up. Published by Secondtosome Studios, the series will ship regularly to your comic shop and will not cause you to have to mortgage anything in order to enjoy a comics story.

♪ WHERE DO YOU COME UP WITH ALL YOUR GLORY TODAY, CHRISTA? ♫
SIGH
I'M REALLY NOT AS CREATIVE AS THEY THINK I AM.
I JUST WRITE ABOUT THE PEOPLE I KNOW...
AND THE THINGS I WISH I KNEW ABOUT
AW PLEASE! NOT NOW!
CHRIST...
OH WELL! I SHOULD GET THIS OVER WITH BEFORE THE POOR SUCKER GETS AHEAD OF HIMSELF.
555-2646
LOOK JAY, I KNOW WHY YOU'RE CALLING, SO DUMMY UP AND LISTEN, OK? CALL IT A MOMENT OF WEAKNESS OR INSANITY.
WHATEVER HELPS YOU SLEEP AT NIGHT.
ANYWAY, THE POINT IS, THAT LITTLE SHEET ROMP WE HAD LAST WEEK MEANT NOTHING TO YOURS TRULY.
SO! IF YOU WERE CALLING FOR A REPEAT PERFORMANCE, I'M AFRAID YOU'VE JUST WASTED YOUR QUARTER AND I...
NO NO PLEASE JAY DON'T BEG. PLEASE.
LIKE I WAS SAYING, I REALLY HAVE NO INTEREST IN STIRRING THINGS UP AGAIN.
IT WAS FUN
IT WAS SWEATY
BUT WHEN IT COMES RIGHT DOWN TO IT I'M AFRAID YOU REALLY HAVE NOTHING TO OFFER THIS GIRL
I'M SORRY, WHAT?
YOU..
GAVE...
ME...
WHAAAAT!?!

Click on Globe returns to contents

THE GOOD, THE ABADZIS AND THE UGLY

Borderline's Jay Eales spoke to Nick Abadzis, one of the mainstays of legendary UK anthology Deadline, to see what he's been up to in the years since then.

TO someone whose experience of the UK comic scene derived mainly from reading **The Beano**, **Whizzer & Chips**, the occasional **Roy Of The Rovers** and, later on, titles like **Warlord**, **Battle**, **Action** and most especially **2000AD**, the newsstand appearance of **Deadline** #1 in 1988 came as something of an eye-opener.

Edited by **2000AD** stalwarts Steve Dillon and Brett Ewins, it introduced me to a whole new generation of talent; folks who were either brand new to comics, or who at least hadn't first gone through the current breeding ground for UK creators, the **2000AD** Nerve Centre.

Jamie Hewlett and Alan Martin's *Tank Girl* began there, later to spawn a not terribly good movie, and a much more successful enterprise for Hewlett in the form of the world-conquering cartoon pop band Gorillaz. Philip Bond, now primarily known for his work for DC on projects like Jamie Delano's **Hellblazer: Bad Blood** and Howard Chaykin's **Angel and the Ape** miniseries, unleashed Pippa and Liz, stars of *Wired World*, which someone simply *must* reprint soon, if there's any justice in the world. Matt Brooker, aka D'Israeli D'emon D'raughtsman, flaunted his Esperanto in *Timulo*, before *Lazarus Churchyard* came along. Steve Dillon's *Sharp* and *B-Bop & Lula*, and the first UK reprints of Peter Milligan and Brett Ewins' futuristic detective *Johnny Nemo* strips, were regulars. So were Julie Hollings' *Beryl The Bitch* and, last but not least, *Hugo Tate*, the character most often associated with Nick Abadzis.

Asked how the **Deadline** gig came about, Abadzis explained: "Dumb luck, more than anything! And the kind mentorship of Steve Dillon and Brett Ewins. Prior to **Deadline** I was working as an editor at Marvel UK. When I left I got a studio with a couple of other escapees from that company, Steve Cook (up until recently long time designer on **2000AD**) and John Tomlinson (erstwhile editor of **2000AD**, now at the BBC). I survived on freelance work from Marvel until Steve told me that a pair of **2000**'s artists were in the next studio cubicle to us preparing their own independent comic mag. I literally stuck my head over the cubicle wall, saw Steve and Brett look up at me and introduced myself: 'I'm a cartoonist. Will you look at my portfolio?' They did, and liked *Hugo Tate*, which was a couple of doodled pages stuffed into the 'folio as an afterthought. I invented the character as a way of freeing myself from the problems of drawing, i.e. the perceived need to make it look *publishable* or mainstream. That was why it started out as a scrawl, no pencilling, just straight down on the paper. Steve Dillon especially was very encouraging, detecting my desire to experiment with comics storytelling. He gradually allowed me to increase my page count with *Hugo* and told me to run with it, which I did. Hence the rapid development of the character from comedy stick-man into fully-fledged comics metaphor for angst-ridden teen."

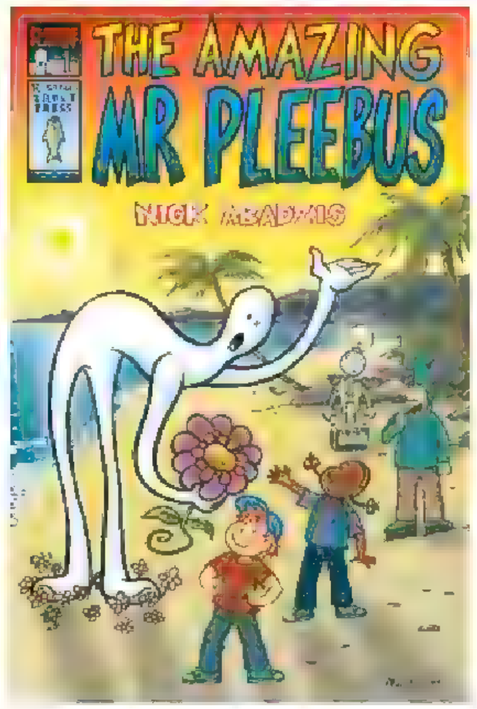
In the introduction to the 1993 Atomeka Press collection **Hugo Tate: O, America**, Steve Dillon wrote: "The first time I saw Hugo, way back in the summer of '88, he was a rather bad-tempered stick-man in a strip tucked away in Nick's portfolio of art samples. Brett Ewins and I were putting together material for the first few issues of **Deadline** magazine, and we asked Nick if he'd like to do a few more stories featuring this strange little character. He agreed,

and, over the next three or four months, the world of *Hugo Tate* began to take shape. With the introduction of a varied and interesting supporting cast, Nick could take his little stick-man into dangerous territory and, as his story ideas became more ambitious, Nick's style evolved. Death, grief, love, sex and friendship were all subjects dealt with in stories told with a subtlety and humour all too rare in the world of the comic strip. Nick had brought Hugo Tate to life."

With a few issues under his belt, Abadzis introduced a white shape-shifting character called Mr Pleebus, only able to say the word "Pleebus!" Although intended just as a momentary diversion in the *Hugo Tate* strip, Pleebus proved popular with the audience: "[Mr Pleebus] first appeared in one of Hugo Tate's dream sequences. For some reason, several people picked up on it (Brett loved it) and so I put him in his own strip, as an antidote to writing *Hugo* all the time. He always seems to have had a life of his own."

After **Deadline**, Abadzis wrote the horror-themed *Darkness Visible* and some *Vector 13* (*X-Files* influenced sci-fi short stories) for **2000AD**, **Children of the Voyager** for Marvel UK's Frontier line, and **Millennium Fever** for DC Vertigo, and then seemed to drop off the comics enthusiasts' radar for some time. Filling in the blanks, Abadzis explained: "After **Millennium Fever** I had a proposal for another mini-series in with Vertigo, which they were deliberating over. Meanwhile, a UK children's book company came to me and asked if I'd like to write and draw some children's graphic novels. I wasn't hearing anything from Vertigo, so I decided to go for it. Over the next couple of years I authored four **Mr Pleebus** books.

"In turn, this led to me working for Heinemann's Literacy World scheme, for whom I've written and drawn, thus far, three titles (two full-colour 48 page graphic novels) and a kids' picture book. That's exciting, because it means kids in schools all over the country, and now also in the US, are learning to read by way of my comics. The only downside is that they're not available to buy in shops, as Heinemann sells directly to schools! You can get them from their website though, I think. I've also illustrated about 20 other children's books, written scripts for kids' TV (*Bob the Builder*), drawn countless comic strips and illustrations for BBC Worldwide, co-developed and illustrated a massive website about ancient Greece for BBC Digital (appropriate, given my heritage)



and authored a bunch of foreign language strips for an offshoot of Scholastic Press, Mary Glasgow Magazines. I'm still contributing to BBCi (as BBC Digital has become known) but am also currently working as a development editor three days a week for a London publisher. That's fun, because basically I'm developing titles for kids and, as always with me, this involves comic strips, among other things. There's a lot of visualising involved in this job too and that's good because I'm happiest when I get to both write and draw.

As if that workload wasn't keeping Abadzis busy enough, he has found the time to start up his own publishing imprint: Rising Trout Press. Obviously, Abadzis has discovered a secret supply of hours to fit in each day, to keep up with everything: "I'm trying to manoeuvre myself back into a position where I can let rip again with some of my own stuff. I love doing children's stories, in whatever medium, but I do miss the sheer experimentalism and all-out id-satisfaction of doing the type of stuff I started out doing on **Deadline** (i.e, for older readers). That was sort of the thinking behind Rising Trout Press, which came into being after a visit to Washington DC's Small Press Expo in 2000. I was encouraged to self-publish, and our first three titles have been the all-ages **Pleebus Planet** books. (**The Amazing Mr Pleebus**, **The Freaky Beastie of Hill Road School** and **The Magic Skateboard**). At the moment, these are being distributed by Diamond, but we're looking at ways of making them available through regular bookshops and via the 'net, too. But RT Press is also intended as a way of issuing stuff that otherwise probably wouldn't find a publisher (at least, not in the UK), just ditzy little items that I can have fun with. In those cases, they'll just be little small-press type things... I really like the idea of being an independent publisher who can publish nice trade paperbacks like the **Pleebus Planet** books, but also groovy little zines."

With *Mr Pleebus* having made the transition from his **Deadline** roots, can *Hugo Tate* be far behind? Abadzis has good news: "Our next *big* book is intended to be a *complete* collection of the *Hugo Tate* strips, at least all the stuff that tells the story of Hugo in London and America. A lot of those earlier strips were never collected, so it'll be nice to have the whole story under one cover. It may even include a little new material, I'm not sure yet - it depends on whether I get time to do it before the deadline I've set myself, which is next Spring. There's also the possibility of Top Shelf publishing a limited edition small batch book of some of the one-off stories that I did in my **Deadline** days, which'll include quite a bit of unpublished or little-seen stuff. And if both of those projects go well, who knows? I'd certainly be into doing more projects for publishers like Top Shelf. I like the idea of returning to my, er, for want of a better term, *underground* roots. I've never given up on comics; I love the medium too much. I moved away from the industry mainstream, but I never moved away from the medium."

Rising Trout Press doesn't have a website just yet, although one is on the way - as soon as Abadzis is able to fit hours 48-56 into his working day, I suspect! In the meantime, they can be contacted via email at: *risingtroutpress@yahoo.co.uk.*

LIVING IN A NOWHERE WORLD

Far from the madding crowd of the comic shop, and free from the interference of editors and publishers, there is another world of comics. A world where work that is honest, individual and recommended by word of mouth – which implies quality and compels attention – can be found by everyone, whether they read and collect comics or not. In fact, you're there now, or you were very recently. The Internet.

Nowhere Girl is an online comic story created, written, drawn and coloured by Justine Shaw. It's a heartfelt tale, a tragedy, a love story, and a tale of lost beginnings and found endings. And you can read it for free at www.nowheregirl.com just as soon as you've caught up with the creator, here in conversation with Borderline's Andrew Cheverton as Nowhere Girl Part 2 nears completion.

THE JUSTINE SHAW INTERVIEW

Borderline: There's a tendency to often associate the author with their work, and this can be exacerbated in the intimate dramas of autobiographical comics, or those drawn closely from the creators' personal life and feelings. How much of your main character, Jamie, is Justine responsible for emotionally, beyond the creation?

Justine Shaw: Yeah, I think the first thing people who've read Nowhere Girl say when they meet me in person is, "You're Justine? But... but you look nothing like Jamie!" It never occurred to me when I was writing Nowhere Girl that people would think that Jamie, the lead character, was supposed to be me. I mean, there's quite a bit of me in her, naturally; also two or three other people I've known over the years. I was surprised to get any attention myself at all, once people started reading Nowhere Girl. For instance, I barely put my name on the website, but often people seem to have a need to know about the human beings behind the things they read, or listen to, or watch. That was all a surprise.

> *"Oddly enough... I always had a kind of thing for Nightcrawler"*

Another thing that kinda made me go "blink-blink" when Nowhere Girl came out and people associated Jamie with me was, since she is gay, but I didn't say whether I was or not, I got quite a few emails from people basically asking whether I was gay or not. I was like, "Huh? Why would you care?" For the record, I'm bisexual, homo-emotional (if that makes any sense), though, like I say, I keep to myself pretty much. I've only dated a couple of times in my life, and that's fine with me! I tend to get crushes on comicbook characters far more than real-life humans (I guess I relate to comicbook characters better than humans). And that's all I really care to say about it (I have to find some eloquent way of saying that in my FAQ so it satisfies peoples' curiosity, but doesn't come across as me blathering on about it if they really didn't care, and bless those who don't!).

BL: You can get that over and done with here, if you'd like. Ladies and Gentlemen, meet Justine Shaw, creator of Nowhere Girl:

JS: Hmm: I've just turned 30. I was born in the United States though the rest of my family is English and Irish, and I "grew up" in the vast suburban wasteland of Southern California. I moved to the San Francisco bay area several years ago, and that's where I currently live. I had tried to get work as a freelance artist for years, but mostly got dicked around by people who wouldn't pay me what they agreed to, or bounced checks on me, etc. Yuck. I wound up "subsisting" by working retail and odd jobs. Eventually my hobby of being into computers led to a gig as a teacher's assistant at a technical school, and from there I went into production work at a DotCom company (this was during the boom years). I eventually became one of the main developers on an important part of the business at that company, but unfortunately the company spent far more than it made. I'm lucky to have landed on my feet after the bust. I'm starting to move out of development and hopefully into network administration duties (that's my career path). It hadn't occurred to me, with all my

expenses, that seeking a career working in comics might be something I could pursue at this point. I kinda tried my hand at it and never got anywhere, so I went where the money was (I'm a sell-out! Woo hoo!). I still wanna keep my career in the computer industry. I don't wanna have to depend on Nowhere Girl to pay my rent or put food on my table. I don't wanna charge money for it and have to care whether people like it or not, whether it's "marketable" enough, or "entertaining" enough to the masses. I don't wanna have to cater to the lowest common denominator. I don't wanna have to put an uber-babed-out Jamie in a bikini with an AK-47 mowing people down screaming, "What's the frequency, Kenneth!?" That stuff is all well and good, so long as I don't have to spend my time making it or reading it. Of course, the downside is since Nowhere Girl is something I do in my spare time, if I don't have any spare time that week, I don't get to do any Nowhere Girl. If that goes on for three weeks, like recently, when I've barely had time to sleep, I get very, very unpleasant to be around. Jamie's a force of nature in my head, and if I don't get her out, I start to go nuts.

BL: Now everybody knows what they need to know. And having crushes on comic book characters is a well-known, yet under-documented, phenomenon. The soap opera aspect is maybe more responsible for the easy identification the reader creates between themselves and the character they fall for. Or for many it's just power figures in skimpy clothes. As the song goes, "Who do you love?"

JS: I would say I have a huge crush on Dean from Elizabeth Watasin's Charm School. My god! A vampire-greaser-auto-mechanic! <swoon>. I find Clover from Blue Monday pretty crushable <blushes>. I used to have a crush on Rogue from the X-Men when I was a kid, back when she was drawn by Paul Smith and John Romita Jr., before she got turned into a rejected member of the band Poison in the late 80s. Also on the subject of 80s X-Men: Storm with a Mohawk = H.O.T. Sydney from [Alison Bechdel's] Dykes to Watch Out For cuz she's a sell-out to The Man[tm], just like me! Manya from Jen Benka and Kris Dresen's Manya, 'cause she's just so darn cool. Oddly enough... I always had a kind of a thing for Nightcrawler! I think I'll stop there before I really embarrass myself!

BL: That's not embarrassing by the average comic fan's standards. I personally find the way Frank Quitely draws Jean Grey entirely distracting. You've obviously been into comics for a while; is Nowhere Girl your first foray into creating for yourself?

JS: I've worked on some other projects in the past, but you know, I was a very small part of someone else's project. I've worked on stuff like Clown Story for www.jitterbug.com, where I did lettering and inks for the second half of the story, and did grey tones for the whole thing. I illustrated a few pages in The Factor comic series (the only thing I've done that's actually in print), a couple of book covers, CD covers, hmm... associated other illustrations for Jitterbug: not tons of stuff! Most of the stuff I've done was as submissions for various companies back in the day, stuff that wound up in the recycling bin (at least I hope it was recycled; that was a lot of paper!). So, I'm really new at this whole thing. I made Nowhere Girl for myself with the intention of showing it to a few friends if they were interested, and frankly most of the people I know don't give a whit about comics anyway, and my audience was basically "me". So to have Nowhere Girl read by lots of people still blows me away when I think of it.

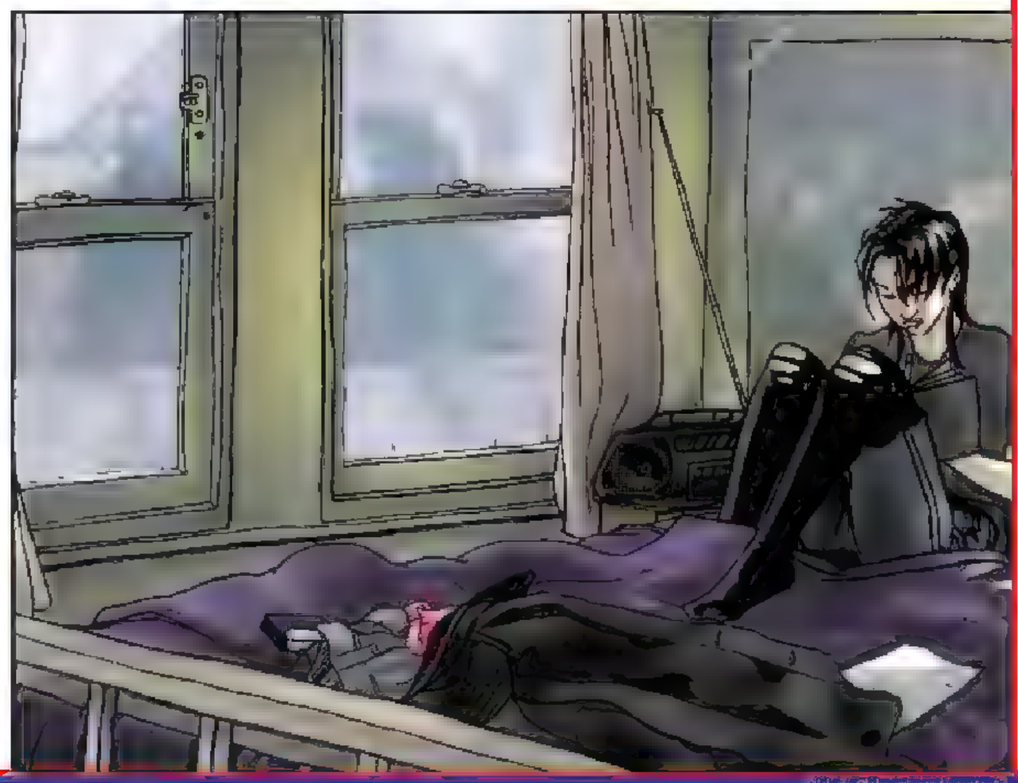
BL: You have an eclectic list of comics whose characters you have crushes on. What comics do you read, admire, and take influence from?

JS: Lessee, (a non-exclusive list, off the top of my head): Transmetropolitan, Blue Monday, Max & Lily, New X-Men, Optic Nerve, Dykes to Watch Out For, Small Stories, Love & Rockets, E-Sheep, Charm School. As for what influences me, I would say some of the people whose work has inspired me most are Jaime and Gilbert Hernandez, Elizabeth Watasin, Ariel Schrag, Alison Bechdel, Kris Dresen, Grant Morrison, Warren Ellis, Jill Thompson, Chris Bachalo. Going waaaay back, I would say Chris Claremont's original run on the X-Men seriously warped my adolescent mind.

BL: You and thousands of others. For those interested in making their own web-comics: what's your method for working? Is it at all similar to the traditional methods of paper comics?

JS: I think it's fairly traditional to an extent. I type out the draft of the story on my laptop, then print it out and take a notebook and a pencil and hide somewhere away from everyone in my life, and do the storyboarding and dialogue for the whole story.

Then I draw (on 8.5x11" paper, fairly small for standard comics) in blue-line, non-repro pencil, then tighten it up with regular pencils. I then scan all that in and do any clean-up work that's necessary. I do all the colouring in Photoshop, some of the effects I do in Painter, but it's mostly Photoshop. So I don't ink at all, I just do tight pencils and scan them at a black and white 50% threshold bitmap into Photoshop. Once the drawing's in Photoshop, I make it a layer, not a background. I then put it in "Multiply" mode, and create a new layer underneath for the colours (with the linework being in Multiply mode, the colours show through the white from the layer underneath, but the linework is preserved). Any special effects that would go over the linework, I make another layer on top of the linework and work there. When I do the lettering, I flatten out the images to save memory and work in a new flattened file and do all the letters in



the computer.

One thing that's actually changing for me as I do Part 2 is I'm drawing the paper part more like I work in Photoshop; that is to say, I'm drawing in "layers" more and more, using more tracing paper, getting the foreground, middle ground, and background in separate sheets, then compositing them all in Photoshop once I have them scanned. This allows some cooler effects, better re-use of backgrounds, etc.

BL: You're doing very well with Nowhere Girl as an online strip, but do you have any ambitions to bring the comic into print, either yourself or by approaching companies with it?

JS: When I went to start drawing the original comic, I said to myself, "You've a choice: either make this vertically tall so you can do it as a print comic, or if you're serious about putting it online, format it for the shape of the monitor screen," which is what I wound up doing. I'd thought at the time that would preclude ever doing this in print without redrawing and re-colouring the entire series, which is something I'd never want to do. However I've been encouraged to do a "wide-screen" book version of the comic since people saw it online. I dunno right now. I think I would like to do a print version of it at some point, but when I have more of the story done. Ideally it would be one large trade paperback with the whole story, but I've a way to go before I do that. If I did do that, I'd have to really look at partnering with a company, I think, as the costs to do a full-colour trade paperback would be prohibitive.

BL: Your art seems quite minimalist, compared to the colouring which is lush and textured. It's a wonderful combination that works incredibly well, but is it deliberate? (And why aren't you working in comics as a colourist?)

JS: Well, the last part of the question first: I'm not working as a colourist as I only shopped myself around to a couple of companies as such back in the day, and I either wasn't what they were looking for at the time, they decided to go with somebody else, or they didn't feel my stuff was appropriate (or just plain didn't like it). I'd been doing freelance art for a couple of years, trying to get out of retail, and it wasn't working out. My hobby of working with computers happened to lead to a regular gig doing that, and so that's what I went with and never looked back.

As for the technique I use, yes, it's deliberate. I like to

try to play to my strengths and downplay my weaknesses when drawing. It was my fondest wish when I was a kid to be able to draw like Todd MacFarlane did Spider-Man, you know, all the little lines everywhere, but when I did it, it always looked like a crappy imitation. I really looked at Jaime Hernandez's stuff: besides telling a great story, he has a really tight, clean style that uses flat black so effectively he doesn't *need* colour. I tried to emulate more of that look. I wasn't nearly as effective at using black, though. My drawings looked best in black and white as simple line drawings, like cartoon cels before they're coloured in.

At the same time, I was seeing cartoons from Japan, which often radically simplify the character drawings (the parts that have to be drawn over and over and over), and really, really render the hell out of the

environments, the cars, the street scenes, the shopping malls. It's this festishization of the real world that I found really, really appealing.

Simulating the real world has always been fascinating to me. So I started doing work that I felt was more like that: simplify the character drawings, don't cross-hatch when you suck at it, and use colour instead of using black to define value in the picture, when I'm fairly good at colour and not so good at using black alone. Incidentally, kinda off-topic but since we're talking about the colouring here, I thought I'd throw this in. The reason the colouring is really rendered and lush in Nowhere Girl #1 was deliberate. The real world doesn't necessarily look so colourful, but I tried to pump up the contrast between light and dark, and throw in a lot of primary colours where appropriate, to make the art more appealing looking, because the story in part 1 is really dark. It's not the darkest the series gets overall, by a long shot, but as a first issue, it doesn't really invite you in with open arms. If I'd drawn the whole thing in a gritty, b&w style with lots of ink splotches and gritted teeth, I don't think anyone would have read it. I had to make it pretty in order for people to follow it through to the end of part 1, or anyone reading it would miss the point by closing the browser at page 3.

Why was I thinking like that, when I thought the only audience was going to be me and two or three close friends? I dunno, but it seems to work well for it. The colour palettes for subsequent stories are going to reflect their content as well. Some of the cheerier parts of the story might end up having really greyed-out, bleak colour palettes, to soften them, I dunno yet.

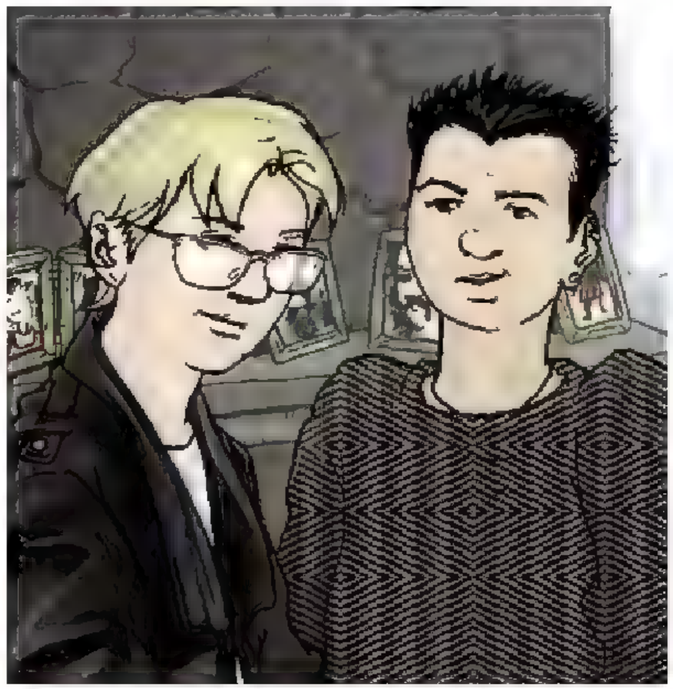
BL: How did it feel to have a recommendation from Scott McCloud - comics writer, artist and theorist?

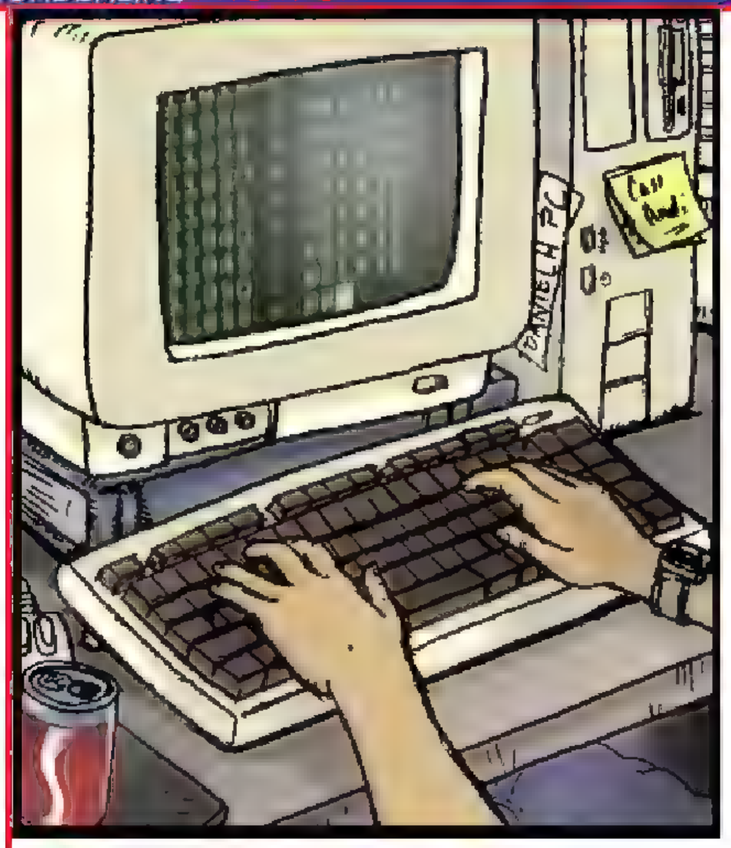
JS: I was overwhelmed! My friend and past collaborator, Nat Gertler, posted a note about Nowhere Girl Part 1 to a message board online, and apparently Scott McCloud happened to read that particular board, so there you are! I don't know anything about online message boards (my view of them was kinda formed by reading those on *http://www.aint-it-cool-news.com* a few years back; not my thing), so I've no idea how Scott McCloud came by that particular message board.

It was, and is, very flattering and humbling to have had such kind words from Scott McCloud. It was very honouring, though I did have a voice in me saying, "This is my first comic! I don't deserve this!" Well, I shut that voice up, anyway.

BL: Good for you. People's first comics tend to vanish from sight or do well from word of mouth, with anything generating a buzz generally worth checking out. What's in the future for Jamie and the story of Nowhere Girl?

JS: First off, the rest of the story takes place four and a half years later, in mid-1999, so the characters from Part 1, when they're in it again, have gone through a lot in the intervening years, some of which will be shown via flashback, some of which will be inferred. Jamie's a very different person when we next see her, and doesn't even look like she did in Part 1. She has, for starters, a career, or at least the beginnings of one. She has to deal with relating to co-workers in a mostly male environment, some of whom are pretty poorly socialized. In Part 2 we meet the character I think of as the title character of the series. I want Jamie, who had been very shy and introspective and quiet and a perfect target for bullies when she was younger, to find herself happily assimilated into the "real world". I wanna know what goes through her mind when she meets someone as poorly socialized as she was in Part 1. How does she treat that person: with love or with hate? Hint: Jamie was taught to hate herself, hate what made her different at a very young age - and that could have been anything really, not just the fact that she was gay - and she internalised that and let it churn in her for years to the point where she was ready to kill herself. If you break it down, she was ready to kill herself because other people who she perceived to be more "correct" than her told her to. Impressionability and moulding/controlling people, whether consciously or unconsciously, are themes I wanna vivisect in the series. There are so many love stories out there, I really wanna write a story about hate, a "hate story" and talk about what hate does to people, hatred of themselves and hatred of "The Other". The first thing fascist (and I'm loathe to use the word, it's so over-used) leaders do is always "define the Other", to rally their disparate forces around what they have in common that they don't have in common with some other group. Now they've got an "army" out of a bunch of disaffected individuals. An oversimplification, but that is the beginnings of mob mentality. Mob mentality at some base level is behind so much of society, it strikes me. A happily assimilated Jamie, only too happy to be "one of the crowd", is now essentially a part of the "mob". Is that really good? Is that the only path to happiness? Does group identity





(that so many people crave; just look at the growth of religions and nationalism for instance) lend itself to mob mentality? Does it have to?

BL: Your plans sound an ambitious jump up from the first part. Are these stories that come from you, rather than filtered through Jamie's character, or does she inform the subject of the strip?
JS: I think the story is...well, yeah, it's really gonna be ambitious for me, we'll see how much of what I have planned I can actually pull off and fit into the story before it's over.

I feel there are the two elements of plot and character that drive stories like this one, and in Nowhere Girl Jamie's feelings about things drive the plot beyond a certain point. It becomes difficult for me to jump ahead in my mind to Nowhere Girl Part 4 or 5 and separate the way the characters feel from the plot; the plot becomes about how they feel and what they do in reaction to that. It's like, I set up several people, an initial situation, and then I hit "run" and it runs itself like a computer simulation in my head.

When it comes down to it, it's Jamie more than anyone else who is writing this thing beyond a certain point. There are a couple of stories which are about supporting characters, and I don't even necessarily see Jamie as the title character beyond the first issue, but mainly this is the story of her becoming an adult, accepting responsibility for her own feelings, her own issues. How she screws that up drives the story. The other characters drive their own portions of the plot, and when I mix Jamie with the other characters, weird things happen and that's my story right there.

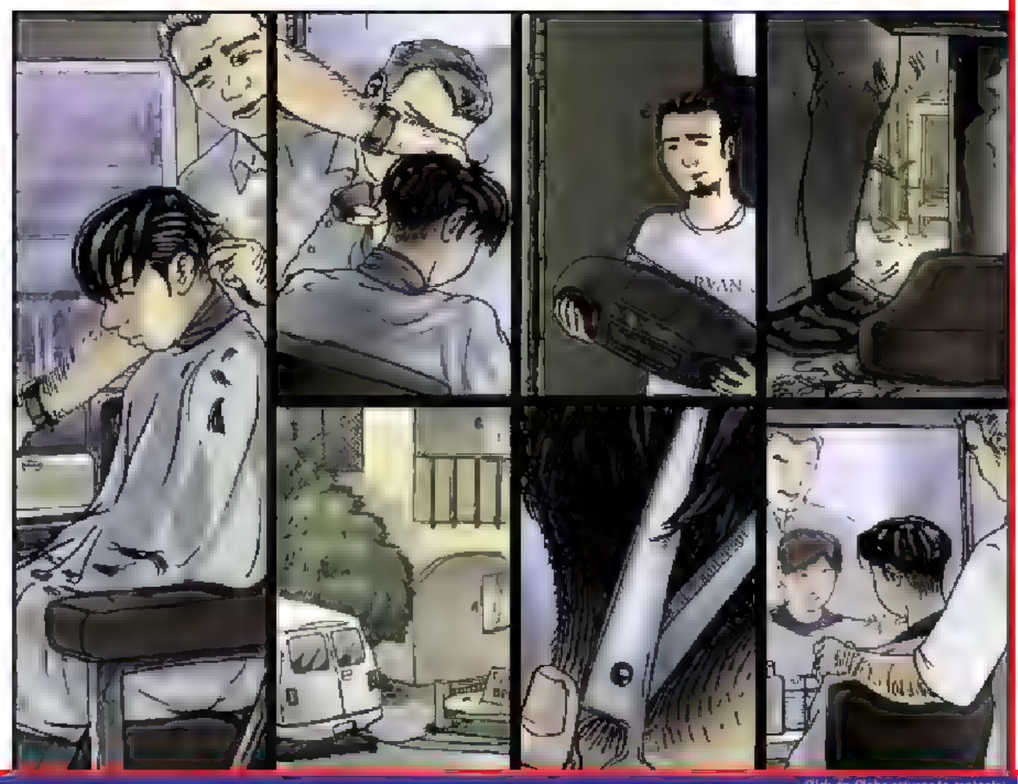
What's interesting for me also is that by the time I get to the end, it might not be anything like what I thought it would be in the beginning. I know generally what happens to Jamie and the other leads, but the specifics could change at a moment's notice, even as I'm drawing a particular panel, depending on whether the character feels they would do that or not.

BL: You've written an intensely personal story about a particular character that isn't a standard stereotype and is marginalized, yet the whole thing manages to overcome what could have been a very specific tale and become a more general one. Did Jamie strike you as a problematic character to use to tell your story, and were you tempted to make her more "accessible" at any point? Or is her personality too much a part of the point of Nowhere Girl?
JS: I think Jamie is a problematic character to tell a positive story through, at least at the beginning. The first one is all about her, so... Her personality really is unavoidable for me in writing her; I can't make her something she's not. But we're talking about someone who is, as far as she sees it, at the bottom of everything. She was taught to hate herself at a young, impressionable age; it's all she knows. Now that her abusers have grown up and moved on and forgotten about her, she still hasn't gotten over what they managed to beat into her: the idea that's she's Bad. And since her abusers, her betrayers, aren't around anymore, she takes on the role of abuser to herself, punishing herself for not "being good". She doesn't see any hope, any way out, and that self-perceived failure on her part to find a way out of her problems is what is pushing her over the edge towards ending her life. Her self-loathing has become a vicious feedback-loop. She's not someone who was easy to make sympathetic in Part 1: either I think you feel for her or you don't. So yes, she was problematic as a "hero" for the story. However I'm not interested in "Heroes" who always dress in white and do "The Right Thing" because it's "The Right Thing!" and "Villains" who are always "Bad!" and "Evil!" for the sake of "Being EVIL! Mua-hahahaha!" I'm much more interested in messed up ordinary people who are trying to do right by themselves and others, but often end up causing harm to themselves or to others, inadvertently, or through misguidance.

I was also not interested in watering Jamie down to make her more palatable during Part 1. If I'm going to do a story about someone who is on the edge of killing themselves, for whatever reason, I'm not going to "make it funny" or try to take the edge off of it. I feel the way Jamie is during Part 1 makes her later actions in the rest of the story more comprehensible. The way Jamie is beginning with Part 2, which picks up the story just over 4 years later, is more accessible, more likeable, on the outside. She's funny, she actually likes things, she is enthusiastic about where she is and where she's going, and has a very weird sense of humour I don't know how to categorize yet. But is she perfect now? Did she bring no baggage with her from the end of Part 1? There's a maybe overly dramatic saying that goes, "You never dance with the devil and walk away with your soul untainted." Jamie's a good person, I believe that, but she's going to do very questionable things, and without the "punch" of knowing who she was, where she comes from, those things don't have as much impact when they happen.

BL: We'll look forward to catching up with Jamie and Nowhere Girl when Part 2 goes online. Thank you for taking the time to chat, Justine.
JS: Thanks for talking with me, Andrew, I appreciate the opportunity to talk about my stuff. It's been a lot of fun. Now, as Basil Fawlty said, "back to the world of dreams..."

The first part of Nowhere Girl can be read at http://www.nowheregirl.com/



Click on Globe returns to contents

COMIC FESTIVAL

BRITAIN'S OFFICIAL ANNUAL COMIC CELEBRATION - IN BRISTOL SINCE 1985

THE SMALL, ALMOST IGNORED, CONVENTION

Mike Carey, writer of Lucifer, interviewed by Borderline in #2, and thoroughly decent bloke, agreed to write up a convention report on this year's Comic Festival 2002, held in Bristol over a stinking hot and humid weekend.

When most of the country's minds were on a dull 1-1 draw between England and Sweden and the 50th anniversary of the ascension of Queen Elizabeth II, holding Britain's premier festival this weekend was always going to be a tough act...

IT was the best Bristol ever - and I never dreamed for a moment that I'd be saying that.

When I walked into the main hall on the Saturday morning and checked out the lie of the land, my heart sank. The hall itself was a good size, and in that respect it was a big improvement on last year - but one look at the talk rooms suggested trouble ahead. They were just areas curtained off within the main space, and the larger of the two was set up so that it extended sideways from the speakers' chairs: that meant a lot of your audience would be away off to your left as you spoke. Difficult to have a really interactive panel - difficult even to make eye contact.

Some of the decisions made by the publishers were a little off-putting, too. No DC or Marvel booths - hence no previews of new projects, and a big barrier to creators wanting to make contact with a particular editor.

But as the first day got into gear, it became obvious that a lot of things were going right. Spectacularly right, even. The sheer volume of traffic through that main room seemed to me to put previous years in the shade, and this was graphically demonstrated when I came back after a lunch-time meeting: the stewards were only letting people in one at a time, because they were right up against the fire safety limit for the building! Later on, talking to Tripwire's Jbel Meadows, I learned that they'd sold as many copies on the Saturday this year as they did across the entire weekend at Comics 2001.

And the lack of publisher booths did what it was meant to do. It put the DC and Marvel editorial staff out in the main hall, circulating constantly among the fans and creators, usually without the ramparts of a long queue to put people off. I spoke to lots of people who'd just bumped into Mike Carlin or Bob Wayne in the course of the day and managed to have a constructive talk without an appointment or a half-hour wait.

Okay, there was a down side. The room got horrendously hot and humid, and the talks *were* on the whole less effective in those cramped and badly designed spaces. Having the toilets right up against the left-

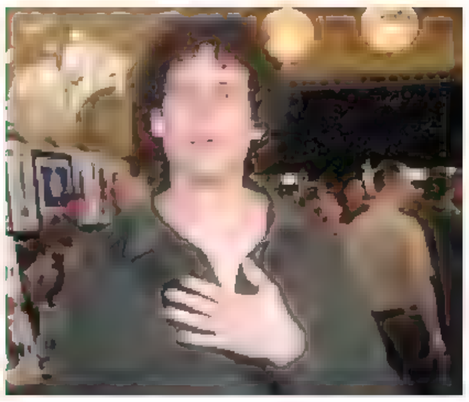
hand edge of the main talk room was a particularly diabolical bit of sabotage. But just in terms of the mood and the buzz, it's been a long time since there's been a British Con that's been this good.

What stays with me most? Well, in the Hypotheticals panel, Lee Barnett tried very enjoyably to put Joe Quesada on the spot, and it was fascinating to watch that particular battle of wits. Put Mister Q in a corner, he just opens a door that you didn't notice was there and walks through it. Borderline winning the National Comic Award for best specialist mag – that was an emotional moment, and doubtless you'll hear more about it on other pages of this issue. Dave Gibbons explaining Neal Adams's expanding Earth theory to a bemused table at the awards dinner (it helped to be pissed). The cheers ripping through the main hall when everyone was watching the World Cup match, and the puzzled frowns on the faces of the American guests as they wondered what all the noise was about.

But most of all, just the overwhelming sense of energy and enthusiasm. Marvel back again for the first year since God knows when; an amazing range of really great small press stuff on offer (from Alistair

Pulling, Bevis Musson, the Girly Comic people, Andy Winter and Natalie Sandells, the Goodman brothers, and others too numerous to mention); lots of people who'd met up on internet message boards coming together in the flesh for the first time, and having a fantastic time doing it. It just felt more optimistic and more positive than any Con in recent years.

Too soon to say "renaissance", but let's say it anyway. It was great.



Pictures courtesy of DC Comics: logo, Mike Carey, the venue, the entrance, Jamie Delano, Greg Rucka, Rodney Ramos and Mike Carlin (above) looking cool!

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UGLY, PRINTED ON BOG ROLL, WITH INK THAT RUNS OFF ON YOUR HANDS

BORDERLINE news editor Mike Sivier goes schizoid to discuss small press smash Violent!

What is this crazy Violent! *comic I've heard so much about?*
It's brutal, matey! Brutal and filthy. And funny. But when I say funny, I'm not talking about the sort of gentle humour you might get from a sit-com starring Geoffrey Palmer and Judi Dench.

Violent! derives its fun from the shadowy side of the gallows. We offer the kind of laughs you get from watching a shopping trolley full of zombies taking a molotov cocktail full in the face and then smashing into a shelf full of flammable liquor.

It's the kind of laugh you get from seeing a bunch of guys who've had organ transplants realise they've all come from the same man - a man who can still control those organs and make them do the twist if he wishes - and from seeing him make them do just that.

It's the kind of grim humour you get from seeing the look on the face of a panda who's about to get an electroprod up the dirtbox.

How was it created?
Violent! was brought to life in the reeking back room of an illegal casino, drug den and cathouse in Nebraska in 1878 when a voodoo priest fought a native American shaman over who got the last puff of the peace pipe.

The elemental forces released that day bounced around the walls of the world for 120 years, until a group of intrepid comics fans and creators, led by me (of course) trapped them in a 16-page stripzine.

As a result, the wholesome stories planned for Fluffy Monthly warped into what they are today. Some might say those same diabolical forces warped its editor, too...

What, really?
No.

It was started on the Internet. Stop groaning at the back, there! A whole bunch of us on the 2000AD IRC channel were gabbing about how great Action used to be, back in the 1970s.

This is the British weekly Action, by the way - not the US monthly from DC Comics.

Action was infamously hauled off newsagents' shelves due to complaints that it was corrupting the young with stories that, these days, would probably seem tame. We thought an updated version was long overdue, so we e-mailed David Bishop, then editor of 2000AD, to press for its revival and he said no.

That's when we decided to do it ourselves.

But Violent! *is nothing like* Action*! It doesn't have any of the old strips or characters.*
That's because someone else owns the copyright on them. Don't ask me who. Look how many hands 2000AD has been through over the last decade or so - from IPC to Fleetway to Egmont to Rebellion. Any of them could have bought the Action characters too - or left them behind.

I did make an attempt to inquire into the ownership of the characters but met the usual bureaucratic brick wall that you get with large companies - they couldn't be bothered, I guess.

What that meant for us was that we had to go back to the ideas behind Action - ideas thrown up by popular culture.

So we ended up with a violent crime story (*The Tallyman*), a violent cop (*Mitch Molotov*), a violent animal (*Aggro*), violent nature (*Rabid*) and we were going to have a violent sport story but the writer/artist had to drop out.

We owe the title of the comic to Martin Barker's excellent Action: The Story of a Violent Comic. With an eye to the future I dreamed up the follow-up book title - Violent! The Story of an Action Comic - and that's how Violent! was born.

Who are the main people behind it?
Other than me? Okay, I'm the editor and publisher, which means I decide what goes in and foot the bill for printing the bugger. I do produce the occasional strip - Borderline readers who are familiar with the title may remember *A Killing in Suburbia*, with art by Shaun Bryan, who got a gig at 2000AD shortly

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afterwards. More on that later...

Proving what a nepotistic lot we are, my oppo Jay Eales (fellow Borderline news editor) was in on it from the start - although he didn't actually have a strip in the comic until issue three. As might be expected from his work on The Girly Comic, Jay is the warm and cuddly heart of the operation - which is why his strips feature characters who can slough off their skin, the merciless electrocution of no-longer-endangered species, and serial murderers who skin their victims.

If Jay's the heart and I'm the brains, then Jim Campbell is the dogsbody we make do all the work. Besides churning out strips like *Rabid* and *Mitch Molotov*, he deals with the production side of the comic. He's also responsible for the cover and logo design of Borderline.

The others come and go according to their own commitments. We got a major boost at the start from 2000AD regulars Simon Fraser and Gordon Rennie, who created three of the five strips in issue one.

Wasn't this a bit of a step down for them? From professional comics to the small press?
Not at all - they were just helping out a mate. Besides, the movement works both ways.

Gordon's artist on *The Tallyman* - our most popular strip from that issue - was PJ Holden. The writer was impressed with his work and soon PJ found paid work in 2000AD.

I've already mentioned Shaun Bryan, who has also found paid work after appearing in Violent!

Jim had scripted for the Judge Dredd Megazine before coming to us.

Paul Harrison-Davies came to us from Bulldog Adventure Magazine, which is another great small press jobbie.

So it's a mates-only club, then?
No. When I sell issues at conventions like the annual Comics Festival in Bristol, I make a point of looking at as many portfolios as I possibly can. I'm working with a couple of fan artists at the moment, but I can't say more about them until the strips actually come in.

Why are you so keen on cruelty to animals?
We're not! I mean, okay, we've had sheep that explode when you try to shag them, cats nailed to trees through the head, and most recently a panda killed with an electroprod up the arse, giving it an erection. But you have to balance these things with the first animal to appear in the comic, Simon Fraser's Aggro the Gorilla - who slaughters more human beings than anyone cared to count in the first issue, then appears on the cover of issue two, riding an ICBM.

What's coming up in the next issue?
Hard to tell right now. One thing I'm working on is *Hard-Boiled Hitler*, which I conceived on the spot after a man at Comics 2002 said he only liked Commando War Stories.

The strip chronicles the rise and fall of an Adolf who takes his own version of Captain America's super-soldier serum and then invades the rest of the world - on his own!

Really serious literature, as I'm sure you can see.

You've produced only five issues in four years. You're not really trying, are you?
Everything takes time, buddy. Everybody working on Violent! does so in their spare time. It's a labour of love - I know that's a strange thing to say about a comic so full of nasty stuff - and nothing goes in until we're happy with it.

Okay - so how can we get hold of a copy?
Easy. The current issue costs £2.00 inclusive of p&p (or $2.75 in the US or international) from: Mike Sivier, 19 Lon Cwm, Ithon Gardens, Llandrindod Wells, Powys LD1 6BE, UK. Make your cheques payable to Mike Sivier.

2000AD's LONG HOT SUMMER

It's become an annual tradition for the British SF weekly 2000AD to launch a slew of new series and revamped old favourites in and after a key summer issue, with the aim of setting up a natural "jumping-on point" for new readers. This year the crucial issue will be 2000AD Prog 1300 - and Jay Eales has the lowdown on what's in store…

THE line-up for Prog 1300 is guaranteed to pique the interest of many lapsed readers: the ever-present *Judge Dredd*, *Strontium Dog*, *Rogue Trooper* and a new tour of duty for old favourites, *The V.C.s*.

Strontium Dog

Last month **Borderline** described the situation regarding the new/old adventures of Johnny Alpha, Strontium Dog, mutant bounty hunter, but to recap: The strip was optioned for a potential TV series which fell through, leaving creator John Wagner with a series bible going to waste. He then hit upon the notion of how to bring the deceased hero back without some cheesy resurrection storyline. Given the Wild West roots of the strip, chances are that someone like Alpha would inspire legends, distorting the truth of what really went on. Wagner took the opportunity to go back to some of the classic **Strontium Dog** tales and reconstruct them from scratch, using hindsight to wipe away elements of the strip that he was no longer happy with, such as comedy sidekick alien the Gronk and Alpha's Viking partner, Wulf Sternhammer, in a couple of full colour adventures illustrated by co-creator Carlos Ezquerra. After a few months breather, the dynamic duo is back, with a few tweaks to the mix: in black and white, with Wulf back again (though whether that was due to Wagner bowing to readers' demands or intended all along, who can say?), in an original story, rather than a revamp of an old one, called *Roadhouse*. The Search/Destroy Agents track some wanted criminals to a secluded roadhouse on the planet Portabella, where nothing is exactly as it seems, and they find themselves unable to leave…

The V.C.s

Taking its inspiration very much from Robert Heinlein's **Starship Troopers**, *The V.C.s* - so called because of the characters' nickname *The Vacuum Cleaners*, due their prowess at cleaning up the alien enemy, known as the Geeks - hasn't appeared in the pages of **2000AD** for over 20 years, since the conclusion of the storyline with the end of the war between humanity and the Geeks. The original series split art duties mostly between Cam Kennedy and Garry Leach, and debates still rage in fandom as to which provided the definitive vision of the characters. The new series, penned by Dan Abnett, features just the one artist, rising star Henry Flint. 50 years after the end of the war, man and Geek live in peaceful cooperation. The last survivor of the V.C.s, Steve Smith, works as a janitor, haunted by the ghosts of his dead shipmates. After a horrific attack on the Peace Day anniversary, Smith straps on his armour once more, with a new squad of V.C.s eager to vape some Geek ass!

When I spoke to the creators about the series, and how it came to be revived now, Dan Abnett responded: "I've been pitching to do it for years, pretty much since I started working for **2K**. I think I finally got the right take on the series in at the right time to the right editor."

Obviously a huge fan of the original series, Abnett enthused: "It's one of my all time favourites. Simple, *blunt*, tough stories and amazing art. And the ships, hardware and slang...all fantastic."

I asked about Abnett's decision to set the story so many years after the first run, given that he retained Earther Steve Smith as the focal character. Did he not think Smith a little long in the tooth to be vaping Geeks? "Yes and no. Yes,

2000AD SUBSCRIPTIONS

ONE of the things that has helped to turn around the sales slump that hit 2000AD before Rebellion took over is the overhauled subscription service.

Readers can choose to pay for a year in one hit, as before, but Rebellion listened to the readers for whom a single lump payment was too much, and introduced an option where their credit card is charged on a monthly basis.

There are the usual encouragements to subscribe, such as free gifts (currently, until August 1, a Dark Judges t-shirt) and a saving on the cover price, with free postage. The same deal applies to the Megazine, with even more discount if you subscribe to both at once. A further incentive is that UK subscribers generally get their copies on Saturdays, while the progs arrive at the British newsagents in the middle of the following week.

2000AD by subscription costs £5.50 per month or £66 per year. The Megazine is £3.95 per month or £47.40 per year. Buying both will cost £9 per month or £108 per year.

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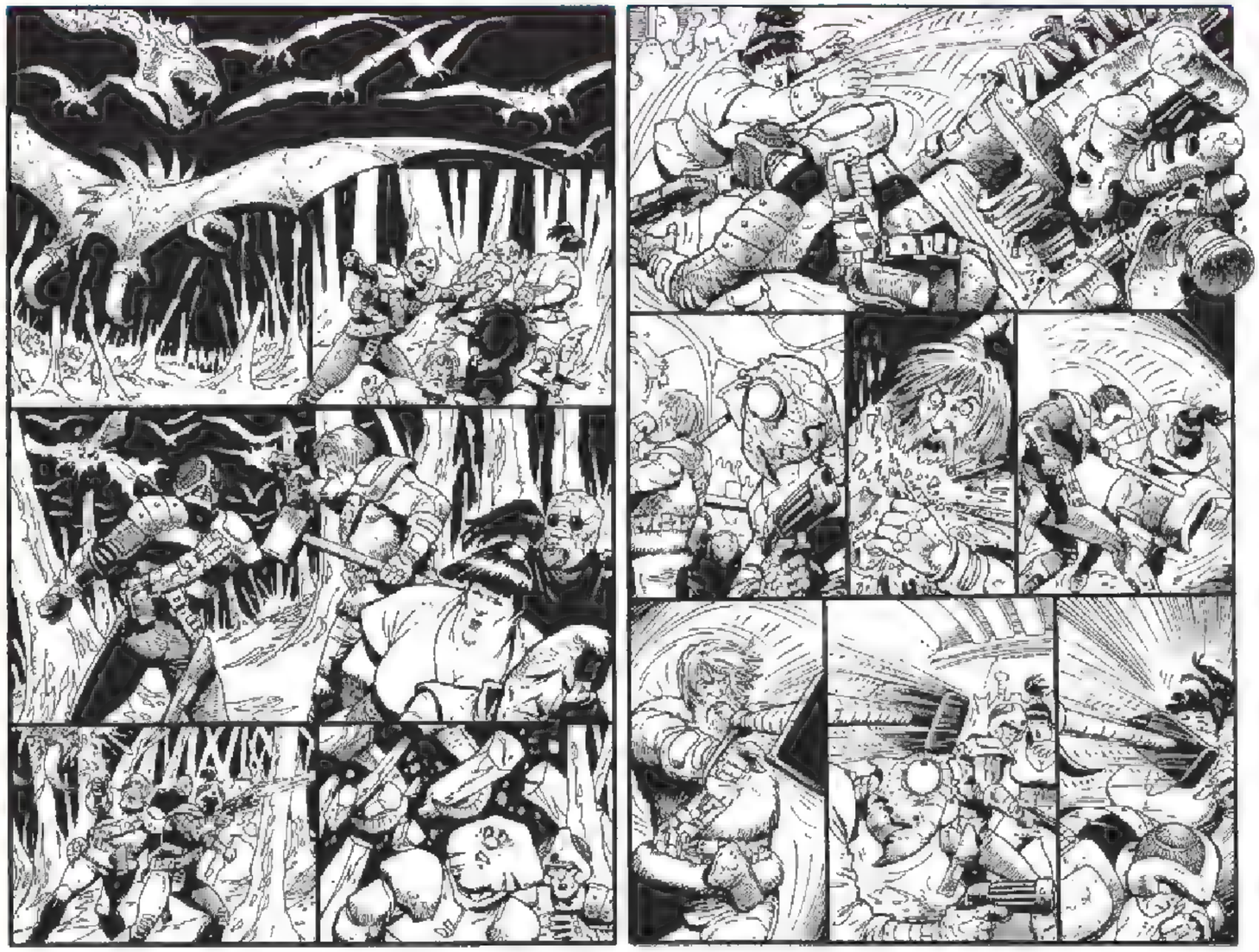


because him getting on a bit is part of the story. He's the old vet now, the Jupe figure to the rookies. And no, because I establish pretty early on that human life expectancy and general health levels are considerably higher by the V.C.s' era. Smith's in his seventies, but in 'human' terms, he's middle-aged."

Given the high mortality rate for the original V.C.s, Smith needs to assemble a fresh team, although it isn't quite as simple as that, as Abnett explained: "Yes, a new team, though expect to see as many old characters as I can work in. Be warned - the mortality rate is just as punishing. There are also flashbacks to the original line up... kinda. I don't want to spoil the story. Suffice to say *all* the VCs are around in this one."

Asked whether he was trying to do or say anything in particular with the story, Abnett replied: "I wanted to have fun, and revive a classic strip that is so packed full of cool elements that it has plenty of life left in it. The best **2K** strips have always been the ones with the simplest, most compelling set-ups, really easy to grasp, simple to follow and instantly involving. *The V.C.s* is certainly that. I'd say it was even *purer* in that respect than the other all-time great future war series – *Rogue Trooper* and *Bad Company*. I don't believe I wanted to *say* anything... this is just grunts versus bugs action. But... maybe there are a few issues tied up in the story that might get people thinking."

Henry Flint explained how he became involved with the project: "After *Shakara* I felt I'd lost my way a bit on simple story-telling because everything was so weird. *Shakara* adopted an experimental usage of spot colour and emphasis on densely illustrated, huge action scenes plus a lot of computer work which slowed me down; with *The V.C.s* I had to get back to drawing human faces and expressions, which I'd missed with *Shakara* [given that, after the first episode, the strip contained no characters who were recognisably humanoid], so this was a nice project I could get my teeth into and re-learn how to make a story flow - very quick, no nonsense page-a-day work.

"I wasn't sure about doing *The V.C.s* to begin with, Cam Kennedy being the only artist who could make it work - also, you can't tackle the writing [too humorously]… you have to be true to the original, which is of the classic war story genre. Dan Abnett's script was great, and a relief that he wrote in the style of the original – classic **2000AD** hero-against-the-odds stuff. Chris Blythe [colourist on the strip] has sent me a few pics he's coloured up, which have blown me away - one being a backdrop of Earth behind an Armada of ships - great stuff."

Rogue Trooper

After a number of false starts, **2000AD** has concluded that the blue-skinned Genetic Infantryman lost his way after the resolution of the themes that powered his early adventures - the search for the Traitor General who has caused his comrades' death, and the quest to avenge those deaths - in much the same way that interest flagged in *Twin Peaks* after the revelation of Laura Palmer's murderer. Dave Gibbons and Will Simpson

rebooted the character with the *War Machine* serial, featuring an alternative Rogue known as Friday, but after the initial storyline, a string of very poor follow-ups dissipated any momentum they'd built. Worse still was the bodged attempt to recapture old glories by trying to make the new series more like its illustrious predecessor, by adding first the trappings, like biochips storing the personalities of dead GIs, and then by committing the cardinal sin of introducing the original Rogue into proceedings, which muddied the continuity to the point of incomprehensibility.

The strip was quietly laid to rest. But then a new series called *Mercy Heights*, by John Tomlinson, debuted, inspired by the popularity of space shows like *Babylon 5*, set on a hospital space station and featuring a pilot with a strangely familiar skin colour. Hints were made as to the ancestry of the pilot, Tor Cyan, over time, and the character moved from his parent strip to a number of solo appearances. These led, we were promised, to a final explanation of the link between Cyan and the GIs, with Cyan's swansong about to see publication in Prog 1299.

Then, hopefully with loose ends tied up, Prog 1300 returns the story to the height of the war on Nu Earth between the Norts and the Southers, with Rogue and his biochip buddies (Helm, Bagman and Gunnar) still hunting their greatest nemesis, the Traitor General. Gordon Rennie assumes scripting duties (as well as penning the first of Big Finish's Rogue Trooper audio plays, *Nordland Calling*), and future story arcs will be illustrated by Staz Johnson (in a creditable Dave Gibbons-influenced style), David Roach, Dylan Teague and Simon Coleby. The first 4 episode arc, *What Lies Beneath*, concerns legends of a haunted lake that turns out to mask a very real danger.

So much for Prog 1300's revamps and revivals. What else is to come from **2000AD** this summer?

A little further ahead in Tharg's editorial schedules is Ian (**The Establishment**) Edginton's first series for **2000AD** - a fantasy/horror pirate saga called *The Red Seas: Under The Banner Of King Death*, to be illustrated by Steve (***Zenith***) Yeowell.

Captain Jack Dancer and the crew of The Red Wench are the scourge of many a Spanish galleon which crosses their path on the 18th Century seas. Then they come into possession of The Albrecht Tome, a grimoire sought by the demonic Dr Orlando Doyle and his zombie lackeys, and the chase is on…

When I asked *The Red Seas*' artist, Steve Yeowell, about the assignment, he replied: "Pirates, voodoo and Demonology in the Caribbean. Ian [Edginton] and I had been talking for some time about doing something together but were always running into the usual problems of schedules not coinciding etc. etc. Luckily for me he was pitching this at just the moment I was looking for the next project and asked me if I wanted to draw it. I really enjoy drawing costume drama so I jumped at it. The first pages have taught me that a) the classic three-masted sailing ship is a fantastic piece of organic machinery, and b) they're bloody hard work to draw! *Red Seas* runs for ten episodes with the first and last episodes being [luxury length!] ten pages."

Sinister Dexter

I took the opportunity to ask Dan Abnett about the upcoming *Sinister Dexter* epic storyline that's just around the corner, and which recent storylines seem to be building towards: "<chuckle> It's going to be fun. S.B. Davis returns to his Downlode stalking grounds to fully paint a tale we're calling *Sinister Dexter's Off-Lode Experience*. For the first time, the boys leave Earth and we get to see what the wider universe is like in the age of SinDex. I guess, like *The V.C.s*, it's another bug hunt. But a very different one. A double-barrel of laughs. Or should that be Barfs?"

Bison

The team that created the short-lived but well-regarded Image comic **The Disciples**, writers Chris Dows, Colin Clayton and artist Laurence Campbell, unleashes a new 9 part twisted police series, involving body-swapping, in July.

Further in the future is the debut of former **2000AD** editor Andy Diggle's first series for the comic: the contemporary *Snow/Tiger*. Diggle explained for us: "I've just finished writing *Snow/Tiger*, which

is being illustrated in exquisite eye-popping detail by Andy Clarke. It's a present-day action thriller about high-tech counter-terrorism. No sci-fi or supernatural stuff, but enough big guns and exploding heads to keep even the most discerning **2000 AD** reader happy..."

Meanwhile at the Megazine...

Things are happening over at **2000AD**'s sister title, the **Judge Dredd Megazine**, too. Dan Abnett continues his 7-part series of one-shot "What If" tales of Durham Red, the so-called 'Strontium Bitch', through the ages, under the umbrella title *Scarlet Apocrypha*, with artists such as John M Burns, Steve Yeowell, Frazer Irving and Carlos Ezquerra. Legendary **Modesty Blaise**, **Axa** and UK girls' comics artist Enrique Romero is also contributing, issue 4.15's *Children of the Night*, in which Durham Red faces off against Dracula himself. As the press release puts it: "In the slum-berg of Alpha Crucis, mutant bounty-hunter Durham Red tracks her latest target to a suite of rooms on the third floor of the Ritz Iscariot hotel. Count Tepes has been on the run for centuries ... but are he and Durham joined by more than just the need for blood?" Issue 4.15 is available from August 28 onwards.

David Bishop's extremely well received series of articles about the early days of **2000AD** keeps on trucking at the heart of new editor Alan Barnes' revamp of the **Megazine**, headed towards an anticipated conclusion at the end of the year. But the changes Barnes has instigated don't stop there: the **Megazine** has recently switched from a monthly to a 4-weekly schedule, echoing what he did at his previous editorial position, *Doctor Who Magazine*. Barnes explained: "It makes it easier to schedule. You don't have 8 issues a year on a 4-weekly schedule and the remaining 4 on a 5-weekly schedule. And you gain an extra issue every year, so for us it makes an awful lot of sense. [The music magazine] **Q** started doing it in the last year. It's just become recognised that the monthly thing is a bit daft." And further format changes are on the cards, it seems. Having changed the dimensions of the **Megazine** with the start of volume 4, in order to facilitate scaling to fit US reprints like the current **Hellboy** series, there have been discussions in editorial and management about whether it should revert to a more European shape - "the better to accommodate classic **2000AD** strips, without the need for page after page of extra borders". Although a final decision has yet to be made, Barnes thinks that "the reprints are now a long-established part of the **Megazine** mix, and I don't think we need to bury them in the back of the mag like they're something we're ashamed of - it's about time we were a bit more upfront about our presentation." After *Bad Company* concludes in issue 4.15 with a collection of rare appendices, including unseen pages from the original John Wagner/Alan Grant and Carlos Ezquerra version dating back to 1984's aborted **Judge Dredd Fortnightly**, **2000AD** greats due for a repeat airing include the never-collected *Nemesis Book II*, by Pat Mills and Jesus Redondo, and *Slaine: Time Killer* - another 1980s Mills epic, which saw Glenn Fabry make his professional debut alongside David Pugh.

At the moment, the **Megazine** is serialising reprints of Mike Mignola's first **Hellboy** story, *Seed Of Destruction*, and it is proving to be the most popular of the US reprints to date. Plans for what will take its slot after its conclusion have yet to be decided, but Barnes wants to keep the magazine fresh with something else, rather than just moving straight on with another **Hellboy** story. There's also a brand new series in store...

The Bendatti Vendetta

The new serial *The Bendatti Vendetta* partly reflects Barnes' desire to see more signature strips for the **Megazine**, to differentiate it from **2000AD**: "I wanted a contemporary series that wouldn't be a million miles from the sort of thing that Luc Besson would make a film of."

Robbie Morrison, series creator, let **Borderline** into the shadow world of the Bendatti: "I can't go into too much detail about the premise of *The Bendatti Vendetta*, because there's an element of mystery involved that is crucial to the series. All I can say is this: For years, rumours have circulated amongst the law enforcement agencies and intelligence services of mainland Europe about a mysterious order known only as the Bendatti, who wreak cruel and merciless vengeance upon criminals that the legitimate authorities cannot touch. You never know who the Bendatti are until it's way too late.

It's a series about the horrors of the world we have built ourselves, about violence and vengeance and their effects on the people who indulge in them, regardless of how justified they may believe their actions to be."

Asked how John M Burns, Morrison's frequent collaborator on *Nikolai Dante*, became attached to the series, Morrison replied: "The initial idea was to produce a series that was closer to a European-style graphic album than the standard **2000AD** fare; mature, sophisticated, complex, very contemporary. John, who's been one of my favourite artists since I was a wee boy getting **TV Action** and **Countdown** read to me, was

both mine and Alan Barnes' first choice. I wasn't sure if he'd be available because he's also drawing the next *Nikolai Dante* series for **2000AD**, but he seemed pretty keen to work with me on it."

Morrison described the structure of the series: "The first three story arcs basically have the same core cast, though the focus does shifts from them to other agents, and to their intended victims. Beyond that, no one is safe. Life is cheap, and no one is guaranteed to survive."

I asked if the plan was for Burns to illustrate the whole series, or if individual arcs would be tailored to different artists: "As far as I'm concerned, John's the main man. I think we're doing something pretty strong here, and I'm not sure if I'd be interested in continuing it without him."

Also in the future for the **Megazine**: just commissioned for issues 4.16 to 4.18 is a new Young Middenface story, described by Barnes as "a sort of mutie *Crow Road*/*Trainspotting* – very, very dark and nasty!"

Devlin Waugh returns to the comic next year with the story *Swimming In Blood – Red Tide*, written as always by John Smith, this time supported by the fully painted art of Jock.

Andy Diggle's breakthrough character Lenny Zero returns to pull together threads from his appearances to date. Diggle explained: "There's a 2-part *Lenny Zero* story called *Wipeout* appearing in the **Megazine** this summer, beautifully illustrated by Jock as always, in which Lenny declares war on diminutive psychopath crime-boss Little Caesar. After that we hope to transfer Lenny over to **2000 AD** – US work commitments permitting..."

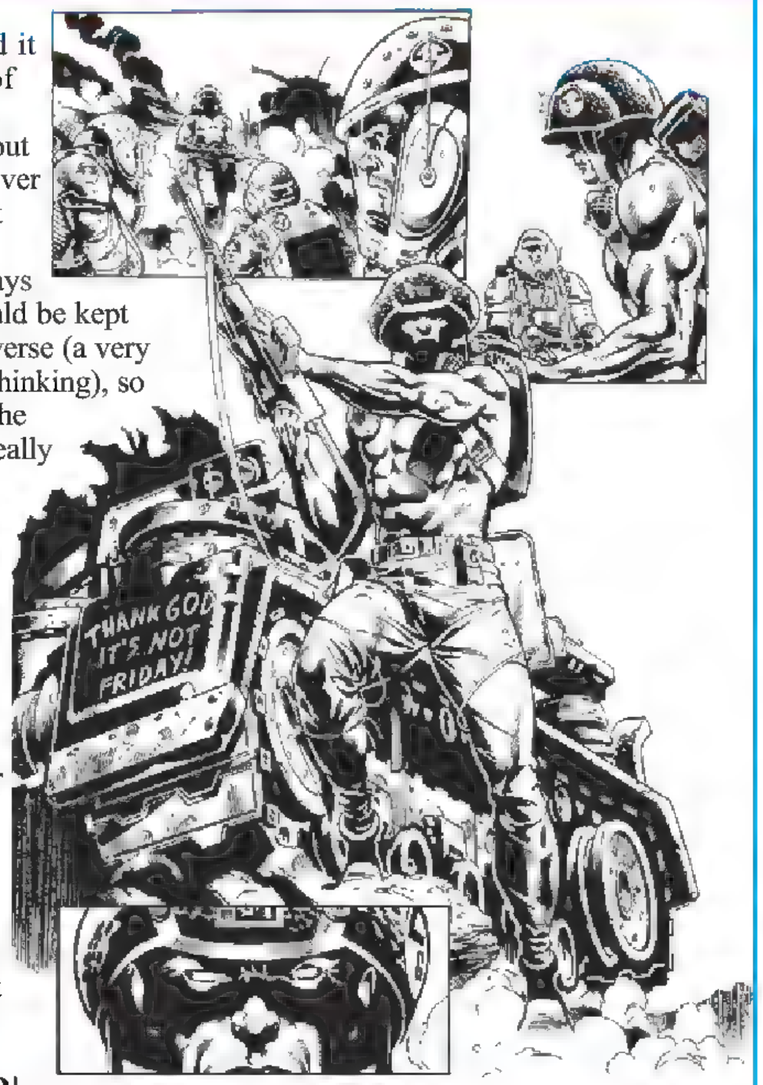
Judge Dredd/Aliens: Incubus

Andy Diggle continues to build his writing career with a prestigious intercompany crossover: "I'm also co-writing **Judge Dredd/Aliens: Incubus** with John Wagner, which is being illustrated by Henry Flint. It's a 2000 AD/Dark Horse co-production scheduled for next year. I'm having a whale of a time dreaming up exciting action/horror set-pieces and making the Aliens truly lethal, rather than the mere cannon-fodder which they became in previous comics. John and I are writing alternate episodes, with John giving me plenty of feedback and merciless criticism on my scripts. It's like having personal tuition from the best writer in British comics, which is a real privilege. I'm working hard to live up to the faith he's put in me, and having a blast while I'm doing it."

Artist Henry Flint gave some insight into how he got the commission: "Matt [Smith, editor of **2000AD**] told me I was in the running for the story but I had to wait two weeks for 20th Century Fox to approve me, they're protective of their franchise and needed to see what kind of artist I was (if I was a **Viz** artist who drew aliens having a dump I wouldn't have got the job). When I heard I'd got the job, I was over the moon. I've always wanted to do a Dredd epic. Also, I'd planned to do a story for Andy Diggle which fell through; this one's written by Wagner/Diggle and it reads great – lots of Dredd hero action.

"I'm worried about cross-overs, I've never liked them, I wasn't keen on **Dredd/Predator**, I've always thought Dredd should be kept within his own universe (a very old-school way of thinking), so **Dredd/Aliens** has the potential of being really great or really crap – that's why I want to do it – a real test."

Between Rebellion's weekly and monthly comics, then, it look as though there'll be plenty of the old returning to satisfy the long term readers' wants, and plenty of the new lined up to excite and attract those who have yet to venture into the universe of **2000AD**!



BEYOND 2000

APART from their 2000AD and Megazine workloads, Andy Diggle and Robbie Morrison tipped Borderline off about their other current projects.

Diggle detailed his upcoming work for DC Vertigo: "Lady Jhanna Constantine is a four-part Vertigo mini-series coming out this November, beautifully illustrated by Goran [Outlaw Nation] Sudzuka. It's a fast-paced supernatural adventure in which a 25-year old Jhanna Constantine (the 17th century ancestor of John [Hellblazer] Constantine) is hired by the British secret service to locate a mysterious box which, if opened, will bring about the end of the world. But it turns out Jhanna has her own reasons for trying to get her hands on it, and she's way out of her depth...

"It's a completely self-contained story, although it does carefully tie into existing Vertigo continuity. Goran has kindly agreed to donate a page of original artwork to one reader who successfully spots all the hidden references to Hellblazer, Swamp Thing and Sandman.

"I also have a new series in development at Vertigo which I can't talk about at the moment - but if it does get the green light, it promises to be very, very cool. Watch this space."

Robbie Morrison has eggs in even more baskets than his former editor: "*Bendatti* aside, I've just been commissioned to do a Spider-Man story, which is pretty good timing, seeing as the movie's going down a storm. I'm writing another *Nikolai Dante* series for 2000AD, and have been asked to do more *Judge Dredd* for them.

"I recently wrote a game called *Maelstrom*, which Jm Murray did the concept design for, for Virgin Interactive. It should be available on the X-Box and PS2 by Christmas. Jm and I are also developing an epic series of European-style graphic novels, which I'm pretty sure will blow everybody away.

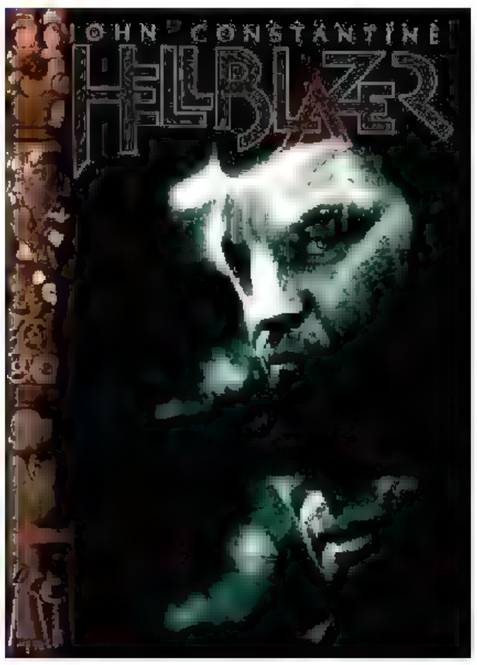
"White Death, a WW1 graphic novel Charlie Adlard and I produced for the European market, [originally published by Les Cartoonistes Dangereux in 1998] has just been released in the US by AiT/PlanetLar, and is receiving rave reviews. I'm also developing a couple of other projects with American editors, but can't really go into too much detail about them right now."

ISSUES

Carol Close – she takes delight in spite...

ANGER is an energy…

Okay, I'm going to come out and say it: comics would be just great if it wasn't for the fans. Y'see, fans (short for "fanatics", wouldn't you know it?) scare the hell out of me and their behaviour ensures that the rest of the adult world continues to view anyone who has anything to do with comics as being somewhere between badger buggerers and kiddy fiddlers on the "Just Say Yeucch!" scale of undesirables. Now before anyone gets the wrong idea, I'm not talking about the guys and gals who enjoy reading comics, occasionally talk about them in polite company and download an excellent but financially stretched PDF



magazine about them every month. Sure, these people ♥ comics, but aren't about to have an aneurysm if they miss an issue of **Daredevil** or get knicker-wettingly upset if a member of X-Force snuffs it. Nah, I'm talking about those bozos who cling to comics and the characters that populate them as if they were family members, who wear Green Lantern t-shirts but *still* expect to get laid and who fulminate angrily about Sylvester Stallone playing Judge Dredd even though the movie came out about three friggin' centuries ago and really wasn't *that* bad.

The Internet seems to be the place where many of these unwanted, unwashed specimens spend a greater part of their time, ranting and raving in chat rooms and on message boards in a way that would usually get them committed to a mental asylum. Being a fabulously paid, insanely busy career girl I don't have the time, energy or inclination to blether away in cyberspace with the kind of people whose lunch money I used to steal at school, but for the purposes of this column I did a quick tour of a few comics-related forums and was pretty horrified at my findings.

Example #1 – Homophobic imbecile ranting about Brian Azzarello's decision to explore John Constantine's sexuality in **Hellblazer**: "I've been reading **Hellblazer** since #1, and he's never been a homo before, and this whole revealation [sic] is one of the worst things I've ever seen a DC editor let pass. If I wanted to read about the adventures of a gay character doing gay things page after page, I'd do it elsewhere. I'm not however, and I don't appreciate one of my favourite heroes (who I have faithfully followed since his debut in Swampy) being mishandled in such a disgustingly over the top manner… DC should hang their heads in shame for letting such an attrocious [sic] bucket of drizzling sh*ts [sic] ever see print."

Example #2 – Enraged Spider-Man fan sounding off at director Sam Raimi *before* the movie had even been released: "First off the organic web shooters shit!!!! fuck [sic] you for changing that man!!! when [sic] stan [sic] did that he knew what he was doing and was proving to the fans that peter [sic] was a real genius – now you are pulling out the venom [sic] web shooters shit on us. This is so fucking sad cause [sic] the web shooters are far more interesting that [sic] some organic shit you wanna put in... the web shooters have a long history but you seem to know shit about them... they can do all kinds of web… they can jam... they can run out… a lot more plot device there then some pitifull [sic] hide my wrist hole in shame shit you wanna pull on us. You are proving to me that you are an idiot."

These two examples were hunted down in less than 15 minutes by someone (i.e. me) far from au fait with the machinations of discussion forums, so I'm guessing there must be literally thousands of similarly unhinged, equally ignorant part-time polemicists out there stinking up discussion threads and dissuading the well-adjusted from making regular visits.

A lot of this frankly bizarre and anti-social behaviour clearly has a lot to do with the posters' immaturity (please tell me the above examples were posted by kids and not adults), but a certain amount of aggression does seem par for the course even from female forum dwellers. I found one girl poster on a particularly popular comics discussion site who has a "signature" at the end of each of her messages containing the words "Don't Piss Me Off" next to a picture of a powerful-looking handgun. It's all posturing, of course, but maybe that's the saddest thing of all. Some fans, it seems, act like a cross between Rambo and Roy Keane in their cyberspace intercourse with other fans because they are essentially powerless, scared little people the rest of the time. The Net gives them the chance to sound off, act tough and generally escape the limitations of being themselves, even if it's just for a little while.

* * *

I just have room to mention my latest *bete noir* – namely those people who spend hours and hours of their lives scouring movies for continuity mistakes. This thoroughly pointless, not to mention soulless and silly pursuit came to my attention during publicity for the *Spider-Man* movie. Apparently Sam Raimi's more than adequate stab at transferring ol' webhead's exploits to the silver screen contains no less than 120 mistakes, making it the third most error strewn film of all time behind *The Matrix* (147) and *Titanic* (136). Now, it wouldn't be so bad if these cock-ups were

absolute whoppers involving different actors playing Peter Parker in consecutive scenes or the Green Goblin suddenly exclaiming "nutso hazelnuts, oh" for no apparent reason during his and Spidey's climactic fight scene. But they're not, in fact many of them are so inconsequential they're barely worth mentioning at all. One reads: "At the beginning of the movie when Peter is chasing after the school bus you can clearly see a bridge ahead of the bus. But neither the bus, nor Parker, go under the bridge," while another helpfully points out: "When Peter first discovers in his bedroom that his eyesight is perfect, he goes downstairs to leave for school and you can see that his hair is combed. However, when he steps outside, his hair isn't combed and is falling over his forehead. But when he gets to the bus stop and sees Mary Jane, his hair is combed again." If you absolutely have to, check out *www.movie-mistakes.com* for more startling revelations. Or better still, chew your own leg off.

WHAT IS MANGA?

Kevin Hill looks at Evangelion...

DURING the mid '90s a controversial animated series was released in Japan. Instead of obeying the standard laws of "giant robot" stories, the series creators - Gainax - defied most of the conventions, producing a dark and sometimes disturbing story that also proved controversial. That series was **Neon Genesis Evangelion**.

Along with the animation came the comic, written and drawn by Gainax designer Yoshiyuki Sadamoto. This was Sadamoto's first full-length comics work, a fact you would be hard pressed to tell from reading the series.

Evangelion's release in the West by Viz brought a number of new ideas with it. Firstly, Viz not only released the standard left-to-right US comic book version, but also a "Special Collectors Edition", published in the Japanese right-to-left format, with colour pages and with the artwork left intact. Additionally, Viz took the bold step of releasing both formats in collected volumes. This way fans of the series can read it how they want, and there is no factor preventing anyone from picking up the book on grounds of format.

Evangelion is set in 2015, with Earth still recovering from "the second impact" - a giant explosion that caused the polar ice caps of Antarctica to melt, raising the world's sea level by 60 metres and causing all manner of additional catastrophes.

The star of the series, other than the EVAs - more on them later - is Shinji Ikari, a 14 year old boy. Rather than follow the standard model of the heroic main character, Shinji is almost the exact opposite. He is shy, timid, submissive, with a general distrust of others; a matter not helped by his father's abandonment of him after the death of his mother. We first meet Shinji when he has been summoned to Tokyo-3, a newly constructed high technology city, to meet his father - their first meeting in three years.

The EVAs, the "robots" of the series, are hulking, demonic, bio-mechanical monsters, with broad shoulders and sleek bodies, often moving with a menacing hunch. These are not the chunky giant robots of old, but something more deadly. Shinji's introduction to these creatures comes when he is coerced into piloting EVA-01 - a monstrous vision of purple and black. While the story would be lacking without the EVAs, their real use comes in providing a background story over which the emotionally complex world of Shinji can be written, although his relationship with EVA-01 adds to the complexity. Their appearances are mostly limited to either training situations or when they are taking on the enemy of the series: the Angels. Equally demonic in look and nature, but without a generic shape or form, the Angels play the part of the monster destroying Tokyo - well, Tokyo-3 in this case.

While his actions are generally dictated by his relationship with his father, Shinji finds in others that which he fails to gain from his father or from his deceased mother. Chief among these is his guardian and immediate superior, Misato, who acts as a mother, looking out for him and trying to show him that he has his place in the world. As any mother would, she encourages him to interact with others his own age, something that helps him form a lasting friendship with fellow schoolboys Toji and Aida - a friendship born, initially, out of confrontation.

Shinji is not a lone pilot; his EVA-01 is joined by EVA-00 and EVA-02, two less demonic-looking but equally powerful beasts. The remaining pilots, Rei Ayanami and Asuka Soryu, both female, are completely different personalities. Rei is quiet, withdrawn, believes wholeheartedly in Shinji's father's plans, and obeys any orders given her, while Asuka is uninhibited, pushy, proud, and highly competitive. This effectively puts Shinji right in the middle of the pair, but mostly living with the stress of Asuka - literally, as no sooner does she arrive in Tokyo-3 than she joins Shinji and Misato in their cramped living quarters.

Sadamoto's artwork, echoing in many ways the artwork of the animation – understandable, considering the artist's position as character designer for Gainax - delineates lean, lanky characters who match perfectly the lean style of the EVAs. As with most Japanese artists, Sadamoto has a superb grasp of technical drawing, with the EVAs just as detailed as the buildings, vehicles and other incidental background objects. This detail is not lost when the EVAs are in action, because where Sadamoto has succeeded beyond expectations is in conveying the movement found within the animated series, via the static form of comics. You can almost match the comic to the animation scene for scene, but often Sadamoto uses alternate angles, or additional detail, to differentiate the work from its parent.

And it *is* a different work. Those not familiar with the animated series will fail to spot differences such as the introduction of Asuka. As the series goes on Sadamoto has changed, added, or removed parts of the animation, which results in a new - and in some ways - better work.

Where **Evangelion** is unusual is in its use of iconic imagery. While this is less apparent in the comic, that still retains the use of the label "Angels" to describe man's mortal enemy, along with some images of the cross - almost reading as a piece of work that is anti-Christian in its values. It seems Gainax, and Sadamoto's, idea for **Evangelion** is that it is no simple animation or comic, but more of a metaphysical journey for the audience to see. What is humanity? Why is humanity? What does humanity want or need? They try to answer these questions, through showing the life of a teenage boy plunged into turmoil.

Do they succeed? Read it and see.

TRANSATLANTIC MEDITATIONS

Arnold T. Blumberg's musings from America...

ACCORDING to an Associated Press article I read about a month ago, University of Minnesota physics professor Jim Kakalios has hit upon an innovative new way to impart information about the sciences to the resistant minds of American college students. The answer to the communication problem inherent in all such scholastic endeavors? Comics!

Kakalios has been utilizing examples from popular superhero comic books to illustrate physics-related dilemmas. Challenged to find solutions, the students eagerly try to work out how much caloric energy the Flash would need to circle the globe in 80 seconds, or if Krypton's different gravity indicated that the planet possessed a dangerously unstable core of super-dense material just waiting to explode. The answers, by the way, are: "He couldn't have eaten enough to do it," and "Of course - didn't you see the whole place blow up in 1938?"

Kakalios was inspired to create this course when he applied scientific principles to one of the most famous examples of Newtonian law in comic book history - the death of Spider-Man's first love, Gwen Stacy. Calculating that Gwen was plummeting at 95 miles per hour when Spider-Man snagged her ankle with his webbing, Kakalios wasn't the least bit surprised - as so many fans were at the time - that the poor girl's neck snapped. You'd think a brilliant brain like Peter Parker might have figured that out too.

While the notion of a comic book-based course in physics is a fun bit of news, it points to a larger issue: Why *haven't* comics taken more of a role in education? What went wrong in the development of the comicbook medium that so stunted its appeal in other areas of application beyond the superhero and genre storytelling circles?

I've actually been teaching a course in comicbooks as literature for four years now, and although many consider it to be a controversial tome, I find that Scott McCloud's Understanding Comics provides a satisfactory foundation for further exploration of the medium. By instructing students in the common language of comics, we can then examine specific examples of the literary art form (through graphic novels like Maus and Watchmen, for example) and see whether or not they take advantage of the many possibilities that comics have to offer.

One question I pose early in each semester is: Can or should comics be used to teach other subjects? We usually read Rick Geary's Fatal Bullet, a tongue-in-cheek period-style recounting of US President Garfield's assassination, and see whether or not its attempt to present history as "edutainment" is a successful one. Surprisingly, most students balk at the notion of learning their lessons from the funny pages. Although you might think that any bored university student would jump at the chance to peruse a comic rather than slog through a textbook, the majority seem to think that the medium distorts the message too much to be trusted. This is, of course, an opinion mired in blissful ignorance, since there can be very few reference sources on the planet as woefully inaccurate and deliberately distorting as American history textbooks.

Granted, Geary takes some license with the subject matter, and it's also possible that these students are well aware that an affirmative response will not transform the educational system overnight and therefore boldly state the negative, but it does give one pause. We live in a society where most of the directions and display labeling that assails us every day - from automobile controls to stereo instructions to airplane safety guides - is provided in what can only be called comicbook format. Some of these omit any written language, relying entirely on iconography to communicate the message. However, no one seems ready to admit these are comics. Bring a comicbook into a classroom for the purpose of teaching a child anything, much less encouraging them to read, and you'll probably be burned at the stake. The more things change...

> *"Can or should comics be used to teach other subjects?"*

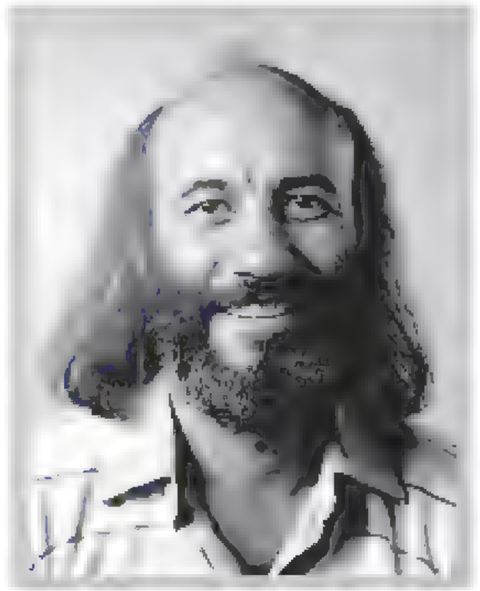
So, inquisitions aside, why *don't* we utilize the comicbook form in more wide-ranging instructional ways, teaching children everything from history to physics and making the process as entertaining as it is enlightening? Could it be that we're afraid? The myopia of the mainstream tends to make it difficult for anyone to accept more than one viewpoint at a time. If we were truly to put our hearts into bringing about the acceptance of the comicbook medium as an academic delivery method, we might be damning comics to the category of scholastic picture books. "Oh sure, comics can teach you about the periodic table and the life of Queen Victoria, but it's not like they can really be treated as legitimate literature! They're only textbooks after all!" We've been spending the last several decades trying to dig ourselves out of one hole - "Funny books are kid stuff" - and if we somehow manage to succeed in making comics acceptable in the schoolroom, we could find ourselves slinging that shovel for a very long time indeed.

Comicbooks still face an uphill battle to achieve any kind of mainstream acceptance in the United States and, let's be fair, other countries as well. While comics as teaching tools is an intriguing prospect - and gaining some limited appeal thanks to the efforts of folks like Kakalios - it's only part of a larger goal. Ultimately, comics should be seen as a medium capable not just of teaching or telling a story but of both, and much more besides.

Now, let's see: If Reed Richards can stretch his arm across three city blocks, what is the tensile strength of each elongated finger when it attempts to grasp the Ultimate Nullifier and operate the lever? I always hated these comicbook science questions! Why can't we have good old-fashioned textbooks instead?

CONTINENTAL DRIFTING

Kevin Schomburg (taking time off from supporting Germany in the World Cup) continues his erratic search for the perfect graphic albums from around the world...



Derib has come a Longway

"ONE little Indian, two little Indians, three little Indian boys..." began the jolly little song our teacher made us bellow over and over again. To teach us numbers in English, that is, not to instil an urge to learn about Indian culture; for the latter she gave us comics, and among them were **Yakari** and **Buddy Longway** by the Swiss artist Derib (Claude de Ribaupierre). We were instantly hooked; and although I can no longer remember which number came after three (*four - Helpful Production Ed.)*, I do have fond recollections of these two grand series depicting, respectively, Indian life and the adventures of a little Indian boy, and a white trapper in rural America.

Derib began his career as an art assistant to the Belgian master Peyo (**Les Schtroumpfs/The Smurfs**) and Peyo's influence shows clearly in his early work. Both series started with a cartoony style, but where **Yakari** retained a simplistic and clear art style which is visibly aimed at children, **Buddy Longway** quickly advanced into a more sophisticated artistic mode, with intricate panel constructions and detailed drawings of characters and their surroundings.

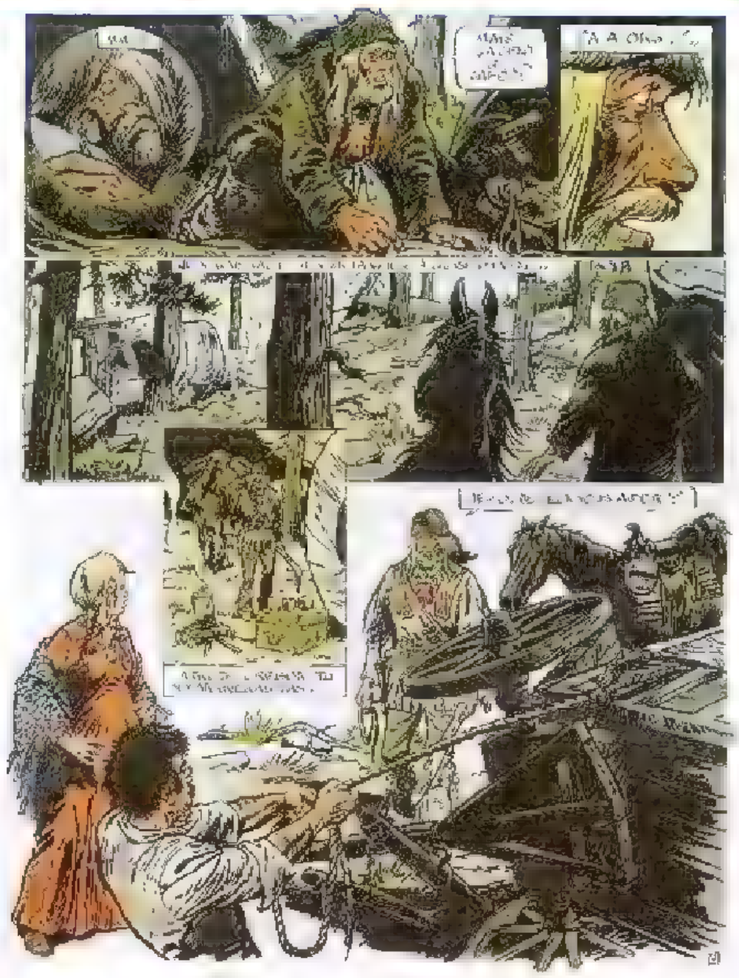
Yakari was first published in 1969 in the Swiss weekly comic **Le Crapaud à lunettes**; it was successful enough for series scripter/editor Job (André Jobin) to give it its own monthly title in 1974. That was picked up in 1977 by Casterman, which still publishes it today. The series details the adventures of the small Sioux boy Yakari, who has the ability to talk with animals, and his horse and friend Petit Tonnere (Little Thunder). Most of the stories revolve around small and helpless animals who need aid against mighty and often carnivorous creatures, and their socialization amongst each other. A village of beavers, Yakari's totem animal Great Eagle, a family of ducks, a grizzly bear, the Indian tribe - all of these get a spotlight with close attention paid to the stereotypical behaviour of the animals. The beavers have the urge to build, the bison know that a part of their herd serves to feed the Indians, and the grizzly bullies the weaker animals until Yakari outsmarts him and, naturally, turns the villain into a nice guy. All of that sounds very light indeed, but there are also extremely emotional and sometimes even mildly philosophical episodes about spiritual beliefs. Probably the most gruesome and captivating episode of the series is album number 6, **Le Secret de Petit Tonnerre,** which recounts the wild horse's spiritual quest.

That nonetheless light-hearted approach to storytelling is paralleled by **Buddy Longway**'s serene but often threatening portrayal of life in the mountain wilderness. In seventeen instalments it details the life of Buddy, a trapper who, together with his Indian wife Chinook and their son Jérémie, tries to make a living in a blockhouse out in the wild West. The series also draws a vivid picture of the overpowering menace that is nature by describing both friendships and conflicts with Indian and white neighbours alike. Derib's depiction of different cultures trying to cope with the hazards of life treads a narrow path between realism and romanticism, while still being entertaining and with a high degree of originality in its attitude towards the western genre and the exclusion of stereotypical behaviour patterns.

Derib takes the same path in two more recent series on Indian life. **Red Road** is social criticism, illustrating contemporary Indian life in a reservation. Very much like the 1998 Miramax movie *Smoke Signals*, the comic deals with frequent problems of reservation life, such as alcoholism and unemployment, and culminates in protagonist Amos's spiritual quest for Indian identity.

Finally, **La Grand Saga Indienne** examines the life of an Indian shaman from his birth up to his death at the hands of a white man. Its four albums amount to an almost ethnological description of details of Indian life, from buffalo hunting through the duties of a Shaman to sun dancing rituals.

Even though the Native American theme forms the basis of the four series described above, they all read very differently and present different approaches: light hearted adventures for children, western drama, social critique and ethnological epos. The only other common denominator is Derib, who brings stunning visuals and compelling stories to all those approaches. Sadly, none of the author's works is available in English - but if you've always wanted to learn French **Yakari** is probably a very good place, and reason, to start. And if you love to marvel at glorious scenery there's really no reason not to give Derib a try.



***Yakari** by Job and Derib has been collected in 28 albums by French publisher Le Lombard. The completed series **Buddy Longway** (17 albums), **Red Road** (4 albums), and **La Grand Saga Indienne** (3 albums) are also available from Le Lombard.*

The film Smoke Signals *by director Sherman Alexie is available from Miramax Home Entertainment on Region 1 DVD and VHS.*

MILESTONES

Mike Kidson explores key moments in the history of comicbooks

Chip Kidd's cover design (left) and Alex Ross's dustjacket design (right) for Les Daniels' book on Wonder Woman - an attempt to transform a populist icon into a fine art object?

HOW and when did English language comics stop being a popular entertainment medium and transform into a minority art form? There can be little doubt that this has already happened. For all the flurries of press releases forever promising new readers and upturns in the market, for all the millions who have made the *X-Men* and *Spider-Man* films bestsellers, US comicbooks sell to a dedicated audience constituting far less than 1% of the country's population. In the UK, DC Thomson's **The Beano** may have won a slew of National Comics Awards last month, but it and its companion paper **The Dandy** are almost all that is left where, twenty years ago, more than two dozen weekly comics could be found in the newsagents'. Where comics were once a staple part of children's lives, they are now an expensive commodity read by a handful of collectors and enthusiasts. So, what happened? Here are just two possible answers.

Youth Culture

Apart from the newspaper strips, and the American comicbooks during a brief period following World War 2, English language comics had been produced primarily for children since soon after they first emerged. So it's common enough for students of comics to point to alternative forms of visual entertainment for children which emerged from the 1960s on and blame them for the decreasing popularity; television, Gameboys, Playstations have all been cited. But are they causes, or just the most obvious symptoms? Since the 1950s a youth culture has been evolving, offering children an ever-increasing range of goods and leisure occupations which has tended to make the older forms of children's entertainment and perquisites seem old-fashioned and irrelevant. If children today are not reading comics any longer, it may be because Nintendo games offer more excitement – but it may just as well be because they're more concerned with acquiring other items which will gain them more peer group respect and status; a Lacoste track suit, a pair of Reebok Classics or the latest Westlife release, for example. Comics may be much cheaper – but they're far less cool.

Technology

Technology has played an enormous part in the cultural changes of the last half century – but it may be that technological change hasn't served the comics medium well. It has facilitated new formats, new printing techniques, new drawing and rendering methods… but only in a very few instances has it resulted in genuinely new approaches to the creation of comics narratives approaches which might reflect the social changes which have themselves emerged from technological development. It may be that while new technology occasionally prompts innovative cultural breakthroughs, more often than not it is applied in the market place to making it easier to do what was already being done; thus I'm writing this column on a computer where a decade ago I could have done the same using a typewriter or a pen and paper. Comics today may *look* very different from those of twenty years ago; and they are certainly more expensive, partly due to the more refined printing and packaging techniques required to reproduce the visual wizardry turned out by artists using new technological means. But for the most part the mainstream examples still contain the same basic narrative concepts and formulae as they have ever since the 1930s, updated superficially, but fundamentally unchanged. Technology, then has left the comics priced beyond the status of throwaway items of passing entertainment, but has done very little to promote narrative innovation in the medium.

A ninth art?

Both of the above may be among the reasons why English language comics have declined as a genuinely popular medium and in effect become a minority art form but have found it hard to become accepted as a *legitimate* art form. The *Spider-Man* film may be a well made summer blockbuster, but does the forty-year old concept of a teenaged nerd becoming able to swing around rooftops and fight costumed villains have a great deal of potential for crossing over from populism into the world of fine art? Perhaps Ang Lee's forthcoming Hulk film will have more of that, due to Lee's arthouse credibility – but as for *Spider-Man*, surely that appeals because a lot of people remember the character from their childhood days, and perhaps even as a lunchbox decal rather than a comicbook hero! To the millions who have flocked to see the film, it serves to remind that comics are for kids, even if kids no longer read them. And children's disposable entertainment, if it has the potential to become fine art, historically takes a very long time to achieve it.

The film of *Ghost World* may offer a better example of such potential – but how many of those who enjoyed it are more than vaguely aware of the alternative comics scene that spawned the story? And here I think we see the tangled knot at the centre of what has happened to English language comics. The mainstream has taken on certain trappings of fine art – a minority audience, a comparatively high price, an increasing amount of critical and academic appraisal – while at the same time retaining a formulaic, populist kind of content which once made it very widely read but is now, frankly, dated and an object for nostalgia. Meanwhile, the real development of the medium into an art form, to be found in the catalogues of publishers such as Fantagraphics and Top Shelf, is spurned by the majority of the minority audience, and thus plays to a *truly* tiny readership.

Maybe English language comics have become an art form after all, complete with their own small avant-garde to be sniggered at by the mainstream…

THE BLANK PAGE

Chev's been to see Spider-Man *and he's still talking about it...*

Dear Mr. Jameson,

Below are the proposed story outlines that I mentioned to you yesterday, which you encouraged me to go away and write up as long as you didn't have to see me again before Hell freezes over. Please accept my grateful thanks for the splendid opportunities that your internship program has afforded me, with special thanks to Mr. Robertson and the delightful Miss Brant, who have both made my time here less stressful than it might otherwise have been.

Yours, Dougal Bailey.

Peter Parker in "I am not that much of a geek!" claim

IT has been brought to the *Daily Bugle*'s attention that High School student Peter Parker, a freelance photographer whose aerobatic and highly opportune photographs of Spider-Man have graced these very pages, feels unjustly maligned by recent claims that he is even more geeky than he appears.

"It has been exaggerated out of all proportion," Parker says. "First they say I had to run for the bus because the bus driver hates me, then he laughed at me while other students threw crap at my head. Then that geeky, pig-tailed girl whose name even *I* don't know refused to let me sit next to her (as did that fat kid and, no, I don't know *his* name either) and then some yahoo tripped me up in the aisle before I'd managed to find a seat. I mean, come on; who could be that geeky? If that all happened in a movie you wouldn't believe it; unless it was a really badly written movie, that is."

"I am not a slut!", protests slut

MARY Jane Watson of Queens wishes to use these pages to redress claims by industrial giant and something of a scientist himself Norman Osborn that she is a gold-digging tramp only interested in riches and prestige rather than a fulfilling relationship with a boy-next-door type.

"He made these accusations in a room full of people I barely know to talk to," claims the red-haired waitress, "and then my boyfriend, Osborn's son Harry, actually had the temerity to say that his father may be right, based on the evidence at hand. So, I went out with a football jock in High School, and now I've suddenly and without obvious reason latched onto an eligible New York bachelor; what's so suspicious about that?

"You have to love me," she whimpers, "I come from a miserable background, and just because it was never mentioned before doesn't make it any less miserable. My dad shouts at me. I'm a waitress, for Pete's sake! And I love Harry Osborn, no matter what his father says about me. I love Harry because he's…well, there."

In a final plea for dignity, Miss Watson says, "I am not some clichéd Hollywood love interest, I'm a real human being with honest emotions and depth. Any acting agencies can contact me through the Daily Bugle. As can Tom Cruise."

Norman Osborn is the Green Goblin, maintains paranoiac

PARANOIAC shouts, "I'm not paranoid, you clod! Look at the facts; who, apart from Norman Osborn, had the means, motive and opportunity to attack and kill every member of Oscorp's board of executives with the sole exception of Norman Osborn, the man recently voted out of his own company by those same board men?" Not to mention complete access to a power suit and glider identical to those used by the Green Goblin. Plus the Green Goblin was plainly heard to shout, "Out, am I?" at the board members before vaporizing them.

Daily Bugle staff reporter Ben Urich almost backs up the claims, saying, "You hear a lot of strange stuff in this business. This is so stupid it almost makes sense. But surely such an elementary job of detection would have been within the capabilities of the Police? For them not to solve a crime that is so allegedly obvious would be the stuff of bad Hollywood movies, and how likely is that?"

Elderly widow defends herself against accusations of sprightliness

"I'M nearly seventy, you know," says May Parker, from her hospital bed, where she is recovering from an unprovoked and obviously random attack by the Green Goblin. "Those terrible *yellow eyes*," warbles recently widowed Mrs Parker, as if reading from some old Hammer horror script.

Yet only days before, May Parker was as fit as they come, bravely handling the loss of her dear husband Ben as well as an ungrateful, never at home nephew, who was callous enough to leave home, abandoning his aunt mere days after his Uncle Ben was murdered. But this mysterious attack from New York's latest supervillain has left her quaking in her bed. "This sort of thing can't be solved with wheatcakes and a glass of milk," she sobs. "Why can't the Green Goblin brutalise more traditional targets like that wonky Norman Osborn?"

Why indeed, the *Daily Bugle* asks. Why indeed?

We don't need superheroes, claim New Yorkers

"OF course we don't," repeats salt of the earth, everyman type, "what can they do that we can't, provided there are lots of handy rocks and tire irons left lying around for us to throw at the villains?"

A police spokesman said, "We would prefer citizens not to throw rocks and tire irons at supervillains if said supervillains are stood directly in front of a cable car or a boat or any city conveyance carrying paying customers. While we encourage people to band together against the forces of darkness and villainy, we should state that it's all fun and games until someone loses an eye."

"Damn straight," says Colonel Nick Fury of top-secret covert organisation S.H.I.E.L.D. "If we could guarantee that only the bad guys lost their sight in this sort of fracas, all well and good. But that's not always the case, I can tell ya."

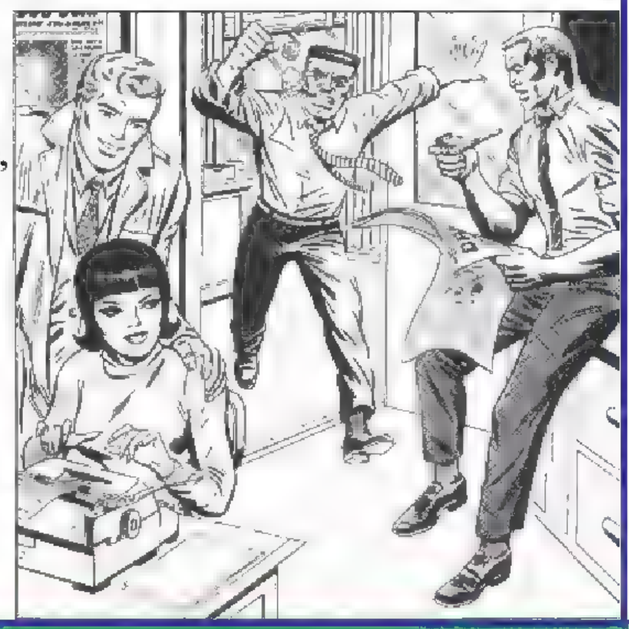
Bailey,

You have got to be kidding me. These aren't newspaper stories; hell, they barely even rate as competent movie script ideas. I've never read such unbelievable claptrap in all my time in publishing.

Never darken my office again, you nitwit.

(And no, you may not have the name of my barber.)

J. Jonah Jameson (Editor)



LEARNING CURVES

Sarah Littlehales speculates for the last time...

Getting Hammered

BACK in the day when **Powers** was new, the name of Brian Michael Bendis started to appear in every second comic available in America. Yet there is no doubt that the style and look that went a long way towards establishing the feel that **Powers** had was due to the efforts of Michael Avon Oeming. While Bendis has been writing tons for the likes of Image and Marvel, Oeming has seemingly taken his time. Now, his style looking like the simplistic off-spring of the Dark Deco of *Batman: The Animated Series*, Oeming has started to become a clear and recognized name that sells.

While comic shops ordered small numbers of **Hammer of the Gods** (Insight Studios), it was clear from sales that it was popular. With that series now firmly under wraps, his latest series **Bastard Samurai** (Image) has proved such a success that Diamond has completely sold out, thus pumping up the price of the only issue available at the moment. Much in the same way that all of Brian Michael Bendis' old work suddenly found its way out of the woodwork and into new trade paperback collections, it seems that Image is now ready to publish collections of Michael Avon Oeming's work on **Bulletproof Monk**, despite the fact that it was never really a hit the first time around.

Marvel-lous Manga

There's nothing new about manga, anime, or the fact that it's "the New Black" in the comics world. There's nothing new about making manga version of old heroes. Take the classic black and white **Spider-Man** and **X-Men** that were published by Marvel in the Nineties, for example. These genuine manga were originally published in Japan, then reprinted in English and sold to a Western market. However, despite the low cover price it seems that the West wasn't quite prepared for an Asian invasion of its own turf just then, as orders diminished and sales dropped to the cancellation point.

But after the influx of **Pokemon**, **Princess Mononoke**, **Tenchi Muyo**, **Sailor Moon** and countless more comics and cartoons from the East established a strong foundation of manga lovers in the West, it was inevitable that Marvel would try once again to give a new wide-eyed spin to their characters. The Marvel Mangaverse has already proved to be a sell-out success, with a high-priced trade paperback collection rounding up all those issues missed by anyone who wasn't eagerly waiting at their comic store's shelves on the days

of delivery. Since the manga month, the Mangaverse has had its own series - which is in keeping with the recent notion that "anything vaguely Eastern must sell".

Super Sales

Once again the adventures of heroes on celluloid affects the popularity of heroes in print. *Smallville* has proved that Superman can still be an interesting character and not the stereotyped Big Blue Boy Scout, which is something of an image that his DC series seem to be stuck with. As such there is a minor resurgence of interest in the comics at the moment, and some traders seem to be taking advantage of it. Certain landmark events seem to be a particular target, including the *Death of Superman* and *Funeral for a Friend* sequences. However, other events, such as the Superman Red and Blue split personalities and the wedding of Lois and Clark, still remain generally reviled, and therefore cheap.

Original?

Still climbing to new back issue price highs, **Origin** continues to keep the traders happy. Given its slow start, the fact that the plot took ages to go anywhere, the pedestrian art elevated only the digital painting of Richard Isanove and now an anti-climactic ending, it seems almost amazing that the mini-series that no-one asked for refuses to depreciate. Still, it's Wolverine. He's popular...

Still with Marvel

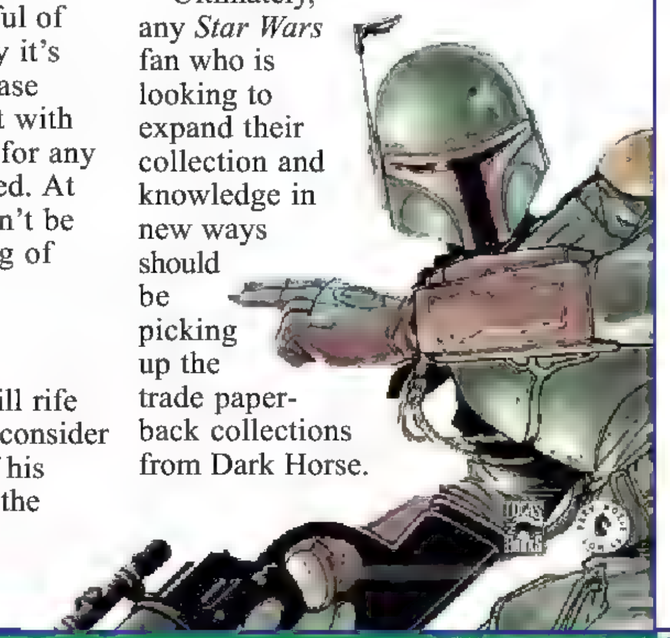
Following in the footsteps of **Ultimate Spider-Man** and **Ultimate X-Men** is the Ultimate Avengers, or, to give it its real name, **The Ultimates** (presumably because it should be the ultimate of the Ultimate titles?). Not even a handful of issues are out, and already it's established a happy fan base while luring others to part with growing amounts of cash for any issue they may have missed. At least Millar and Hitch won't be repeating the tragic ending of **Ultimate Team-Up**.

More Wars

Although speculation is still rife about whether Lucas will consider making the final trilogy of his elongated *Star Wars* epic, the sequel to the prequel is entertaining the masses in cinemas across the globe. Yet despite all the hype around Anakin and Padme, the old stories with Han, Luke and Leia still retain a strong attraction.

The old Marvel stories don't hold the same narrative weight as the later Dark Horse ones, although they can still fetch an interesting penny for the sake of nostalgia. But it's the stories from Dark Horse, made under the collaborative eye of Lucas Film Ltd., that have stirred up a strong fan base over the years. Story lines such as **Dark Empire**, **Crimson Empire** and **Boba Fett: Enemy of the Empire** proved long ago that the world of *Star Wars* that comes after the films is almost as popular as the films themselves. While the new trilogy of films continues to produce its own set of panelled stories (**Darth Maul**, **The Hunt for Aurra Sing** and all the one-shot movie spin-offs), the newer tales supporting the original trilogy (**Union**, **Vader's Quest**, **Chewbacca**) continually prove to be the more sought-after stories.

Ultimately, any *Star Wars* fan who is looking to expand their collection and knowledge in new ways should be picking up the trade paper-back collections from Dark Horse.



MAN ON A MISSION

Martin Shipp's vision of a better comics industry takes a turn in the direction of book shops...

PAY attention; we're going to talk about books.

There was a time when the comicbook was, when it wasn't being hunted down by collectors in some parody of the big game hunter stalking the last Tasmanian Tiger, a disposable commodity that was generally bought by parents and given to children. There is nothing wrong with this. You may complain as much as you wish about young people being unable to appreciate the wondrous thing they have been given. You can whinge as much as you care to about the percentage of perfectly good comics that have been downgraded from NM+ to TF- by the ad lib application of chocolate and spittle by untrained toddlers. I will take no notice. All I care is that children learn to read and then continue to use the skill in an enjoyable manner for the rest of their lives. The loss of a comic book in the pursuit of this is a worthwhile sacrifice.

The comicbook is perfect kiddie tutorial material. It's bright, it pleases many senses and most of all it carries an air of illicit pleasure. It's not on the curriculum. It isn't part of the programme. It's not something approved by your English teacher, and as such it becomes that much more exciting. By making the act of reading a subversive activity, the comicbook enhances that act. And anything that makes reading a more exciting activity for the young is, by nature, A Good Thing.

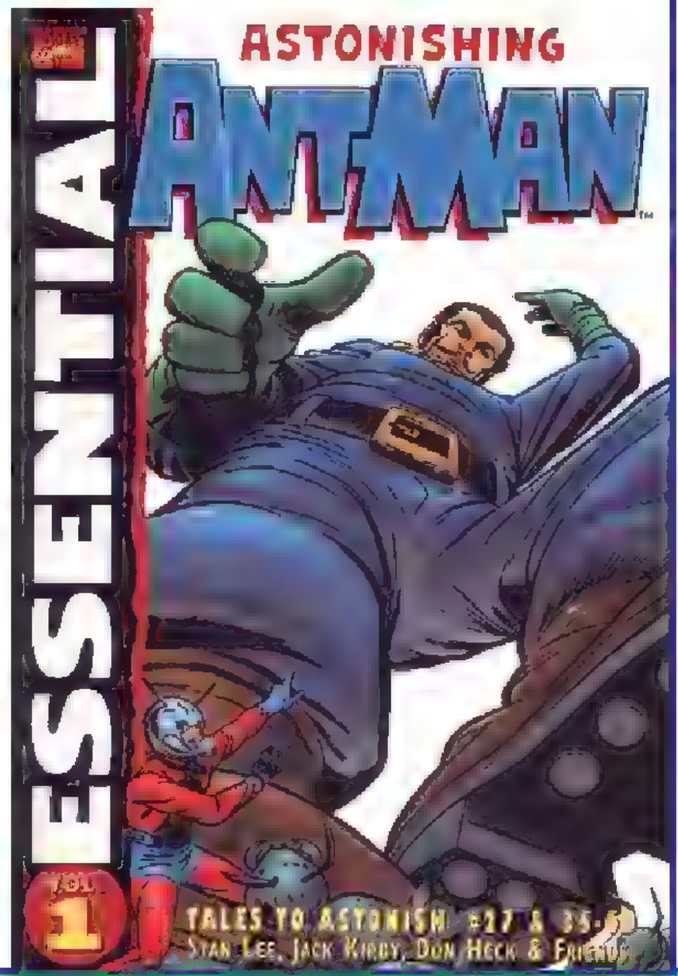
However, something strange has been happening over the last few years. Comics is now such a constrained medium, so bound up in itself and so inaccessible to outsiders, that in order to give a comicbook to a curious child, the well-meaning adult has to drive across town, find a comic shop, find a suitable publication… you get the drift. There is still a need, though, for reading material that carries that frisson of subversion. Which is why, no doubt, the top ten hardback book bestseller list in the UK at time of writing contains four titles by Lemony Snicket. This isn't, you'll note, the top ten children's books. This is the top ten best-selling books, period.

This isn't just a kid thing. We all, no matter what our age or our upbringing, need something that gives us that little shiver of pleasure despite ourselves. It may come from food - which is whence I derive my own personal hell - or drink, or drugs or a low-rent movie. It doesn't matter. For a lot of people that subversive kick comes from reading comics; they know they should be absorbing that new biography of Gladstone or the latest Don DeLillo or the enormous definitive textbook that would be an enormous help at work. But they need to turn off and soak up some under-the-blanket enjoyment every now and again.

Which is why there has been yet another re-issue of Ian Fleming's James Bond books. They're not Literature, but by golly they're fun. I re-read **Casino Royale**, the first in the series, recently and was surprised at how it reads. The character of Bond is harder, more callous and less willing to visit destruction upon his fellow man than he is in later books or in the films. Most of the book's action is centred on a game of cards. Yet as the series progresses, as Fleming is pressed to generate ever-more exciting adventures of a character only intended to appear in one book, as the villains become more megalomaniacal and the weapons more outlandish, diminishing returns set in. Fairly soon - certainly by the time of the films - Bond has become a parody. Doesn't that sound kind of familiar?

An exhibition recently opened in the rather genteel English town of Cheltenham. It was a retrospective of work by Harry Wingfield and Martin Aitchinson, of whom you've never heard. They were the main illustrators of the Ladybird children's books that *were* approved reading for so many schools in the past. The strange thing is that although you'd expect most people to avoid an exhibition centring on one of the duller aspects of their early years, this has been successful enough to lead to a tour. Moreover, there are websites dedicated to the bizarre, stoutly 1950s middle-class world of Janet and John and Peter and Jane. Thirty-somethings now organise swapmeets and collectors' fairs dedicated to these tiny hardbound reminders of their childhood. I can only assume they've completed the task of buying all of their old vinyl records on CD. Doesn't this sound kind of familiar?

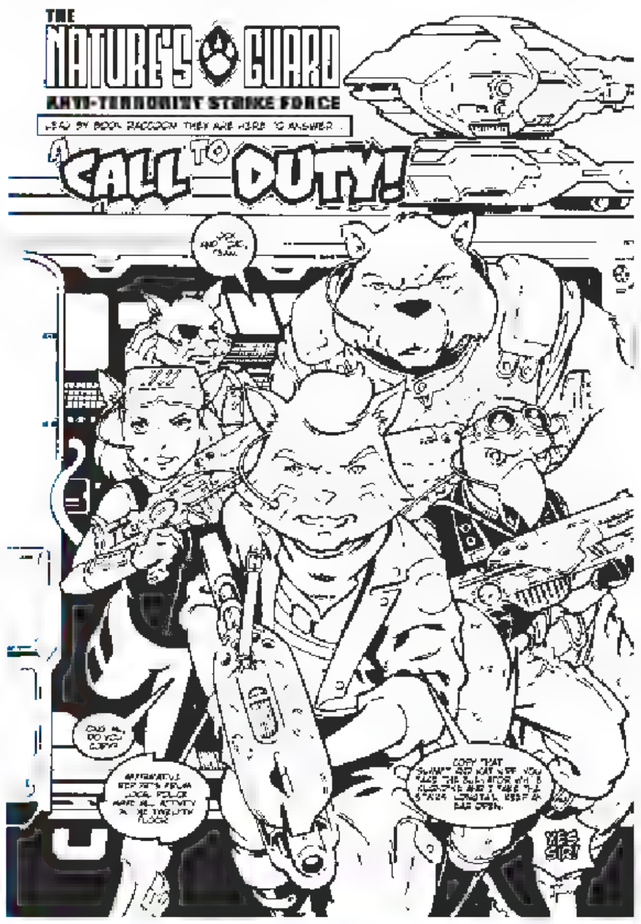
Maybe this is why comics are disappearing down their own plughole. Maybe there is, after all, no need for innovation. Maybe, ultimately, the envelope shouldn't be pushed. Maybe all we need to do to get that lost audience back is to give them what they want: their childhood. Marketing departments should be pushing copies of **Essential Ant-Man** and **Legion Archives** into every high street bookshop in the land. And somebody should, right now at this moment, be buying up the rights and planning the high-ticket facsimile editions of the full run of **Cheeky Weekly**.



IT'S ONLY NATURAL

Borderline's Jay Eales looks at the background to a new British/Canadian venture into the world of anthropomorphic comics and animation.

NATURE'S GUARD is the result of a collaboration between new UK independent publisher Warpton Comics and Canadian TV/Feature Film development company LegendWorks Entertainment Ltd.



Nature's Guard: A Call To Duty is an in-development CGI animated series featuring an anthropomorphic cast of characters, voiced by a slew of actors whose pedigrees include *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, *Indiana Jones*, *Farscape*, *The Fifth Element* and *Urban Legends*. Chief among them are Jeremy [Boba Fett] Bulloch, Peter [Chewbacca] Mayhew, Warwick [Willow, and several *Star Wars* movie roles] Davis, Ethan [Neelix from *Star Trek: Voyager*] Phillips and Michael [*Empire Strikes Back*, *Indiana Jones* and *Grange Hill*] Sheard.

Visitors to Bristol's recent Comics 2002 Festival had the opportunity to meet some of the folks behind *Nature's Guard*, including voice artists Jeremy Bulloch and Warwick Davis, and to see preview material.

The project introduces new characters Boon Raccoon, Kat Nipp, Longtail, Summit, Chirp, Klondike, Decoy, Quickstep, Steelhide and Oasis – the core of the Nature's Guard team, operating from their secret base, Fortress Ironwood, and sworn to defend the world of Forestya against Empress Webula and her SpiderSect Empire. An anti-terrorist strike force with an ecologically-minded agenda, Nature's Guard is engaged in the archetypal struggle of good against evil.

It is written by Jonathan Bryans, a former freelance designer for many major toy companies before setting up LegendWorks Entertainment (Canada) Ltd in 1998. *Nature's Guard* is his first major project and is designed to exploit any and all mediums, including comics and toy lines.

One of the first of those exploitatons will be a 3-issue "prequel" comicbook miniseries published by Warpton Comics, based on the animated series and also entitled **Nature's Guard: A Call To Duty**! The first issue sees the team in action after four senators are abducted by minions of the SpiderSect empire, and the Crane Sap-Fusion Research Complex falls under their control, along with the formidable P.A.W.S. (Positionable

Atmospheric Weapons System) targeted on the Oak Outpost, one of the Nature's Guard's biggest headquarters. The Guard launch an attack on the complex, but have they been outmanoeuvred?

Handling the pencilling duties is Leonard Kirk, probably best known for his work on DC's **Supergirl** and **Superboy** titles and the **Star Trek: Deep Space Nine** series, following early work for Malibu and its various subsidiaries [Adventure, Aircel, Eternity and Platinum].

Inking and lettering the book is Terry Pallot, who has inked Kirk's pencils before, on the 1991 Aircel miniseries **Galaxina**, when both artists were starting out. Since then Pallot has been the regular artist on Marvel's **Star Trek: Voyager** following issue #13, and his most recent work has been **Star Trek: Voyager – Splashdown** and Dark Horse's **Lost In Space**.

Mike Weiringo [artist/co-creator of Image Comics' **Tellos**] and Randy Green [creator of the Tidal Wave Studios/ Image Comics series **Dollz**] will be producing variant covers for **Nature's Guard** issue 2 and 3.

Warpton is a creative collective of artists and writers trying to forge links between different media – comics, film and music. **Nature's Guard** is merely the first fruit of Warpton's plans. The Warpton Comics imprint will be the umbrella for all-ages material, while material more suitable for an older readership will come out under the banner "Warpton Xtreme". Forthcoming titles, in varying stages of development, include: **VampAge** by Steve Causer and Pete Wakefield, a vampiric family saga; **Messiah** by Steve Causer and Christos Georghiou, the first Xtreme title, a 32 page full colour painted 15 issue maxiseries, concerning a small God-fearing town of people convinced that they are playing host to the second coming of Jesus; **To Heaven or Hell** by Steve Causer and Joe Talbot, a 32 page black and white ongoing series featuring Serinda, who guides the souls of the dead to Heaven or Hell; and **Reincarnation** by Steve Causer and Simon Mobbs, a 32 page full colour 4-issue miniseries about a quartet of people connected by visions of their past lives.

Nature's Guard: A Call To Duty Issue 1 will be featured in the July edition of Diamond's *Previews* and will be available to buy in September, from comic shops or direct from *www.warpton.co.uk* or *www.naturesguard.com*

COMICS 2002

THAT FILM WAS FANTASTIC!

A MOVIE WHICH DOES JUSTICE TO THE SPIDER-MAN CLONE SAGA!

ALL OF OUR YEARS OF SUFFERING AS COMIC READERS HAVE AT LAST BORN FRUIT.

:SNIFFF I THINK I'M GOING TO CRY.

WOW! THAT FILM WAS GREAT!

NO! I'M SPIDER-MAN!

BAGS I'M SPIDER-MAN!

I'M HIS CLONE!

HEY! WATCH WHERE YOU'RE GOING!

SHOW SOME RESPECT!

IF IT WASN'T FOR US RELENTLESSLY BUYING SPIDER-MAN COMICS EVEN WHEN THEY WERE CRAP, THEY WOULD NEVER HAVE MADE THAT FILM!

YOU KNOW WHAT— I THINK I SPUN A LITTLE SPIDER'S WEB OF MY OWN IN THERE, IF YOU KNOW WHAT I ME-AN.

I FEEL STRANGELY HOLLOW. THAT FILM WASN'T ENOUGH.

I THINK I KNOW HOW YOU FEEL.

WE SHOULD MAKE EVERY-ONE WHO HAS EVER HURT US SAY THAT THEY'RE SORRY.

DAVE SIM?

WHO IS THIS?

SAY YOU'RE SORRY!

WHAT FOR?

YOU SAID CEREBUS WAS TO END WITH ISSUE 300 BUT IT'S ON ISSUE 700 AND IT'S STILL GOING!

OH... YEAH... THAT...

I WAS REALLY LOOKING FOR-WARD TO YOU DRAWING BATMAN!

SAY IT! SAY YOU'RE SORRY!

TERRY MOORE?

SPEAKING.

SAY YOU'RE SORRY!

WHAT FOR?

I'VE BEEN BUYING YOUR COMIC SINCE IT BEGAN AND KAT CHOO AND FRAN'S RELATI-ONSHIP NEVER DEVEL OPES!

OH... YEAH... THAT...

I WAS REALLY LOOKING FOR-WARD TO SEEING 'EM LE2 UP!

SAY IT! SAY YOU'RE SORRY!

HELLO? MOTHER? THIS IS YOUR SON SPEAK-ING!

IS THAT YOU, JESUS?

SAY YOU'RE SORRY!

I HAVE A GLASS LEG AND I LIVE IN A BIRD'S NEST!

SAY IT!

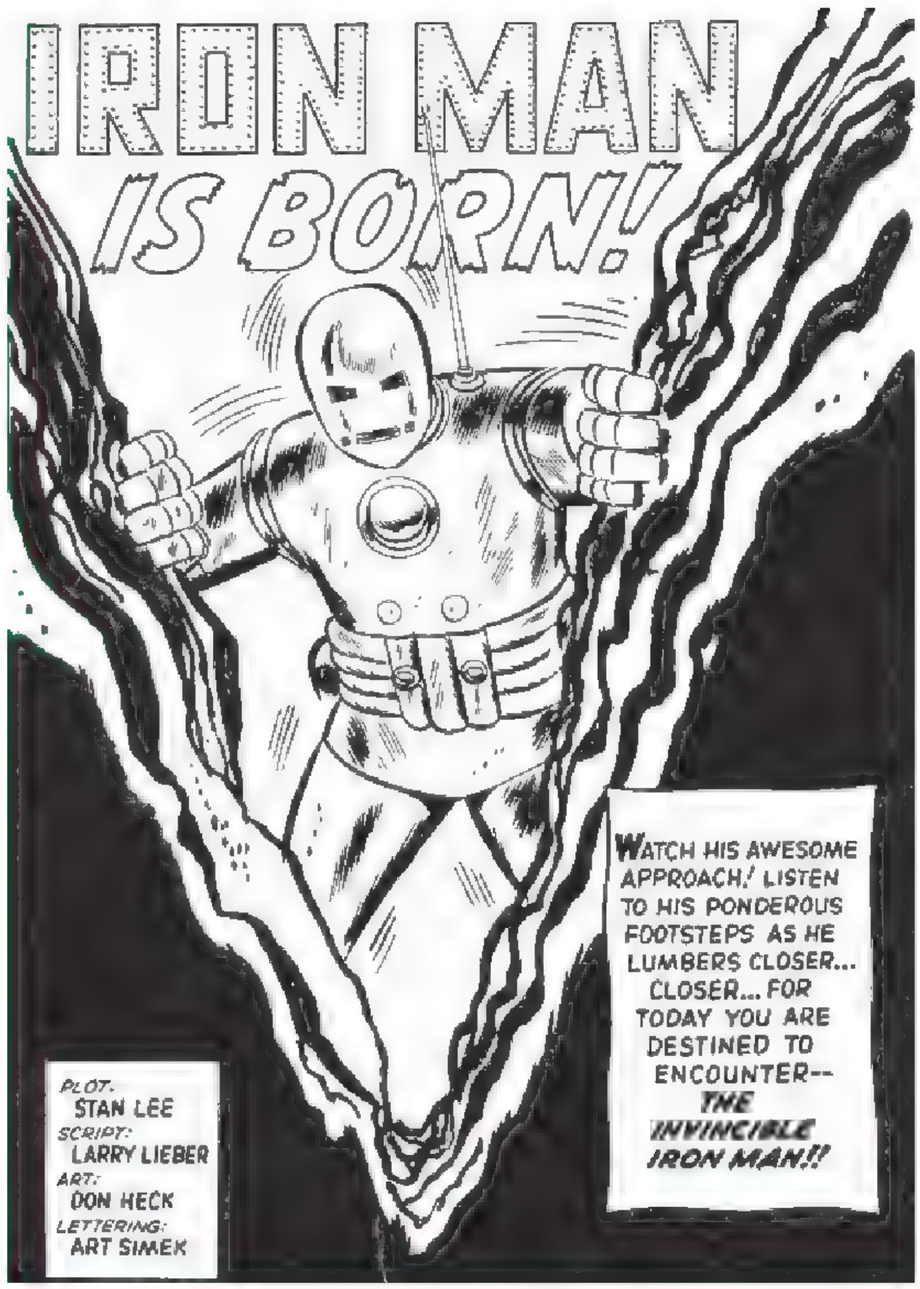
YOU PROBABLY CAN'T RE-MEMBER, BUT 40 YEARS AGO I ASKED YOU OUT AND YOU SAID 'NO'.

SAY YOU'RE SORRY!

NO.

SAY IT! SAY YOU'RE SORRY

IN SEARCH OF DON HECK


IRON MAN
IS BORN!
WATCH HIS AWESOME APPROACH! LISTEN TO HIS PONDEROUS FOOTSTEPS AS HE LUMBERS CLOSER... CLOSER... FOR TODAY YOU ARE DESTINED TO ENCOUNTER-- THE INVINCIBLE IRON MAN!!
PLOT: STAN LEE
SCRIPT: LARRY LIEBER
ART: DON HECK
LETTERING: ART SIMEK

David McLintock went Internet surfing in search of one of US comics' most derided artists...

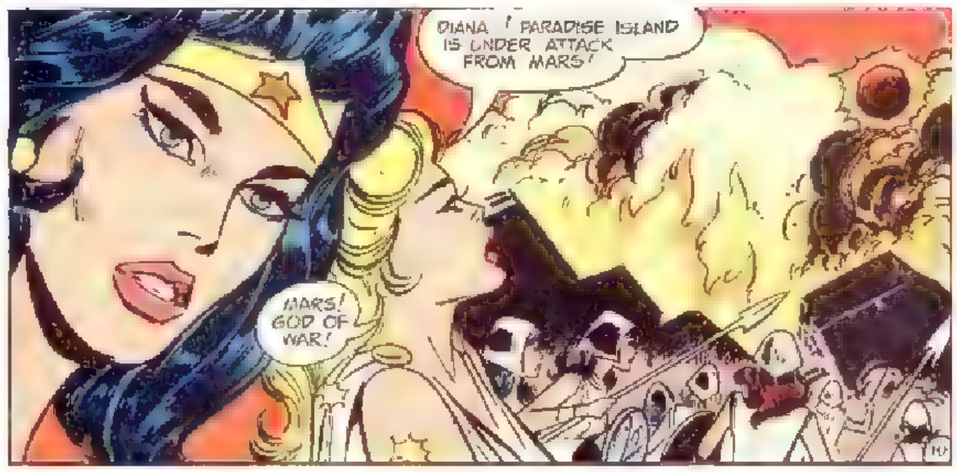
THE golden age of Marvel… the Silver Age of comics. Stan Lee, Jack "King" Kirby, Steve Ditko and… Don Heck? Yup, "Dashing" Donnie Heck, without whom Stan Lee could barely have got Marvel off the blocks. Think about it. Ditko could produce one and a half comics per month tops. Kirby could only manage about 100 pages a week (this is a possible exaggeration on my part). So who picked up the majority of the slack? A journeyman whose art even then could hardly be described as attractive, and looks even less so when viewed with our graphically heightened 21st Century perceptions. Yet, Heck could arguably have been just as important as the two main artistic talents at Lee's disposal. Without him there would have been no Iron Man, which he co-created, no Ant-Man or Giant-Man or whatever he was called, and he was the mainstay on the early Avengers. Indeed it was reading these in the **Essentials** format that got me thinking of the mysterious Mr Heck. Heck (pun), in the early '70s I was a noted expert on Marvel, yet I doubt if I could have told you much about the Don.

Anyhoo, I decide I'd use ye jolly olde Internet and begin a voyage of discovery. Who the heck was Don Heck? So, via the magic of search engines off I went. The search was a lot more difficult than I'd expected. Among the zillion and one sites highlighted (813 pages listed on AltaVista alone) were the usual umpteen hundred which turned out to be nothing more than comics for sale, featuring Don Heck's work. There was no "donheck.com", no dedicated fan site. Hardly surprising, given that Heck's name is not up there with the rest of the pantheon of greats… But, gradually, one was able to piece together the working history of the man. Inevitably also there were the listing sites, detailing the large body of work that the Dashing one had left behind. This guy had at one time or another drawn virtually every super-hero that Lee had ever dreamt up, and then gone over to DC to do the same for their lot. Not bad for someone who I cannot recall as ever having had any fan following to speak of, a sort of Joe Schlobotnik of the comics world. (To put you out of your misery, the mythical Joe was the totally unknown baseball star who Charlie Brown idolised).

Eventually I was able to glean a more human story. In one interview the late John Buscema hinted at a great injustice done to Don Heck by an editor. According to JB, "I was pretty close to Don… he lived 15 minutes from me. How many guys have been destroyed by an editor who got up out of the wrong side of bed… guys who put everything into their job? I know it happened to Don Heck. I recall Don saying to me 'John, help me. I don't know what the hell to do anymore'".

So there is definitely a story there – but, sadly, one I couldn't prise out further via the 'net, and my self-imposed brief was to use that as my sole source. Further speculation on my part here would be merely that, but a reasonable guess would be a situation which led Heck to move from company X to company Y. If big JB didn't want to name names for fear of waking up next to his pet horse's head then I sure as dammit won't go down that line, much to Dobbin's relief.

A site dedicated to inkers (whoops, I've forgotten the address) tells me that Don used Windsor & Newton Series 7 #6,5,4,3 and 2 brushes, and for pens, either a Crowquill or Speedball FR5 and 6. Riveting stuff, eh? Al Milgrom was the lucky recipient of a handful of Heck's pens, Esterbrook Points, before he died. Larry Lieber, that giant of a penciller, recalled "I



remember I once had Don Heck inking me on a 5-page western, and I remember saying, 'My God, he's good at making my stuff look better than it is'", but he couldn't recall whether the first Iron Man story had been laid out by Jack Kirby or was solely Heck's work. A bit of diplomatic memory loss there.

Original Heck art? It's yours for from $65 (for Batgirl spreads) up to $650 for a page of Iron Man from **Tales of Suspense #58**. Seek and ye shall find. Compare and contrast the thousands of dollars for original Ditko art from this period and you get a gauge as to Heck's standing in the minds of fandom. But if you really must have some '60s Marvel art on your wall, and the wife has a habit of checking your credit card bills, then some original Heck might just save your marriage, or at least some of your favourite body parts.

SUDDENLY, AROUND A BEND IN THE PREVIOUSLY GLOOMY CAVE ...
THAT GLARE--IT'S AS BRIGHT AS DAYLIGHT!
AND YET, WE'RE STILL FAR BELOW SURFACE LEVEL! LET'S GO--BUT, BE READY FOR ANYTHING!
THEN, THEIR TRAINED EYES QUICKLY BECOMING ACCUSTOMED TO THE RESTORED LIGHT, THE MYSTIFIED AVENGERS EMERGE INTO AN ENORMOUS OPEN AREA, WHERE THEY ARE ASTONISHED TO FIND--
HOLY COW! WHOEVER'S RAMRODDIN' THE SAUCER HAS A WHOLE UNDERGROUND COMPLEX SET UP FOR HIMSELF!
YOU COULD PUT ALL A SHEA STADIUM IN HERE, AND NOT LOSE EVEN ONE CRUMMY FOUL BALL!
IT REMINDS ME OF A LEFT-OVER STAGE-SETTING FROM ONE OF THOSE JAPANESE MONSTER EPICS!
BE THAT AS IT MAY, I SUSPECT THAT ITS PURPOSE IS FAR MORE SERIOUS... AND MORE SINISTER... THAN WE CAN IMAGINE!
LOOK--THERE, IN THE VERY CENTER OF THE MAZE OF GADGETS--IT'S SOME SORT OF GIGANTIC, GLOWING COMPUTER!
THAT MUST BE THE OMINOUS, UNSEEN INTELLIGENCE WHICH CONTROLS THE REST OF THE SAUCER...AND CAPTURED PIETRO!
STRANGE--IT ALMOST SEEMS AS IF IT'S ALIVE--AND IS WATCHING US!

At *www.samcci.comics.org/~artists/heck.htm* you can admire 15 of Heck's "great covers". Certainly they are okay if a little static, or a lot static when compared to the covers that Kirby supplied for **The Avengers** whilst Don rendered the insides. However, they are a gallery of images from those halcyon days of the '60s and remain charmingly locked in that time. Moving on, a review site whose address I've conveniently mislaid at last told me a bit more. Heck had broken into the comics industry in 1949, when he was merely 20 years old, originally working for Harvey Comics, and five years later was a mainstay of the pre-Marvel Atlas group, drawing across their full range of crime, war, sci-fi and fantasy titles. His heavy use of black and white was influenced by his hero Milton Caniff's "Terry and the Pirates" newspaper strip of the '30s and '40s. At last, a quote attributed to Heck himself : "I would have liked to have hooked up with some good writer and done a newspaper strip but it's a little late now." This was towards the end of his career. One or two passing sites did mention that Heck did some assisting/ghosting for Sy Barry on **The Phantom** from around 1961-62, though.

Bizarrely I even found a site dedicated to the "Heck" family, where those who share the surname can contact each other. And yes, there was Don's niece. If you really, really must it's at *www.genforum.genealogy.com/Heck/*. I didn't have the cojones to try and contact Kathy Heck. Perhaps it was the scary thought that someone might be crazy enough to have a McLintock site out there. Now there's a bunch of people I'd not like to meet on a dark night.

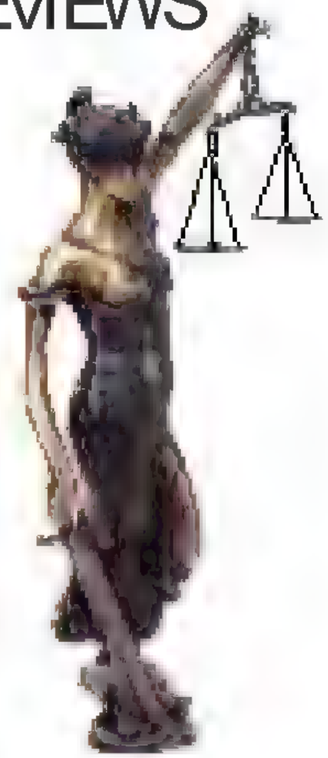
Then, when all looked lost and I'd have had but the skimpiest of information on my man, I hit paydirt. Step forward the prolific Mark Evanier and his POV Online pages. (*www.povonline.com/Don%20Heck.htm*). There it all was, immaculately laid out. The obituary of the late Mr Heck, complete with a biography and numerous quotes from those he worked for during his long career. Born in New York way back in 1929, sadly Don fell victim to lung cancer in 1995. The main thing that comes across from the quotes is that his colleagues genuinely liked the man and hugely respected his talents. Roy Thomas said, "He was a nice guy – always polite and hard working… with a dependability with regard to deadlines that is hard to imagine in this day". Jerry Ordway thought Heck was "a truly under-appreciated artist". Jack Kirby always considered Heck to be the best renderer of attractive women in comics. So perhaps the Dashing One was years ahead of his time, given the recent girlie comics boom. In short he was a pro's pro.

But if anyone is wanting to hear the final tribute to end all tributes, then that was expounded by Tony Isabella, who summed Heck's contribution up with the memorable "If there were a Marvel Universe version of Mount Rushmore, he'd be right up there with Stan, Jack, Steve and Dick". It would be difficult to top that as an obit. But I couldn't help thinking…

"Dick" must surely be Dick Ayers. Whatever became of him? In search of "Dick" next. Oooooh, matron.

LET'S START OFF WITH SOMETHING SIMPLE! WHO CAN GUESS WHAT I'M GOING TO PULL OUT OF MY HAT?
A RABBIT!
A BUNCH OF FLOWERS!
SOME SCARFS!
EROM STAH!
WOULD YOU BELIEVE... MORE HATS?

VERDICT COMICS REVIEWS



THIS MONTH'S JURY:

David R. Booth (DRB)
Jenni Cole (JC)
Jay Eales (JE)
Kelvin Green (KG)
Marissa Guidara (MG)
Rol Hirst (RH)
Mike Kidson (MK)
Pascale Lunal (PL)
Neil McOnie (NM)
Martin Shipp (MS)
Andy Winter (AW)

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Avengers United #15
Marvel UK/Panini
By various

Reprints of the excellent Avengers Forever begin this issue, although the fairly essential annotations from the original series seem to have gone missing - oops! That original series is one of Kurt Busiek's greatest moments on the Avengers title, and with able assistance from a superb creative team it is a true classic, well worth reading as a reprint, especially at this very reasonable price.

As if the main event wasn't enough, this issue reprints the first appearance of the Vision, as part of this title's very welcome tribute to the late John Buscema. Although the circumstances leading to the decision to reprint his Avengers work were very sad, it is wonderful to read these classic comics as high-quality reprints. With more classic Buscema moments promised, this title will be an essential purchase for months to come.

The Verdict: An irresistible package, all in all, with great content and an excellent price. (KG)

Captain America #2
Marvel
By John Ney Rieber and John Cassaday

Let's get the easy stuff out of the way first - this book looks incredible. John Cassaday is fast becoming one of the best artists we have, with a style that mixes classic Miller and

Steranko with Moebius and Kevin Maguire. Really, I'd buy this book just for the art – and I never do that.

But what about the story? Terrorism is such an emotive subject now, and John Ney Rieber writes in such an emotive style, it would be easy to accuse of him cashing in - but almost too easy. If Captain America found fame fighting Nazis, why shouldn't he be used as a symbol of hope - or jingoism, depending on your level of cynicism - in this 21st Century war? It's just a pity the mask and the flag have become everything in this interpretation - there's no sense of the man below, other than his obvious reaction to the horror of terrorism.

The Verdict: Steve Rogers doesn't exist here, this book is all Captain America. (RH)

Daredevil #34
Marvel Knights
By Brian Michael Bendis and Alex Maleev

Daredevil's secret identity is splashed across the front page of the Daily Bugle; his best friend is advising him to cut his losses and hang up the spandex for good. The eponymous hero isn't really at the centre of this issue, however - the focus is on the reaction of the Daily Bugle staff, and particularly Ben Urich and Peter (Spider-Man) Parker. Both men know that the story is true; both vehemently deny it. The remainder of the issue is taken up with Foggy spouting off his views on the whole situation. DD himself has less than 30 words of dialogue all issue - in his own title.

Bendis's run on Daredevil has been frustratingly inconsistent but this issue seems to confirm that he works best when he's skirting the edges of the main action rather than immersing himself in it. His meticulous characterisation and knack for wringing out the emotions can't be faulted, but sometimes it seems as if the action he needs to hang his reactions on is an inconvenience he simply wants to get out of the way as quickly as possible. As a whole, the run is muddy and slow-moving but punctuated by real gems such as this. Whether the highs are high enough to make the lows acceptable is difficult to decide, but for the moment this issue is a quick, worthwhile fix.

The Verdict: Dialogue wins out over plot as Bendis examines the reaction of Daredevil's closest confidants to the hero's "outing". (JC)

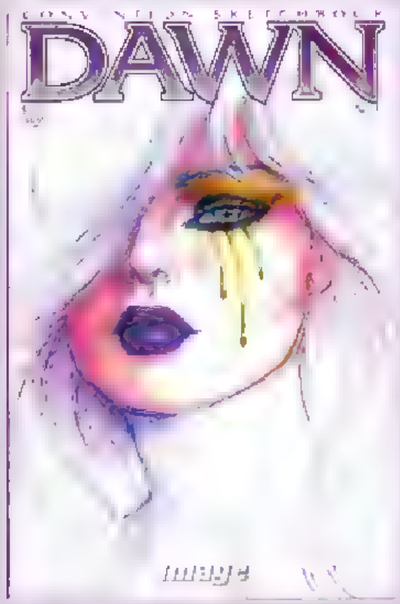
Deadline #3
Marvel
By Bill Rosemann and Guy Davis

No, that's not Elektra with a haircut on the cover, and don't judge this book by the horrible photo-realistic Greg Horn cover. Horn makes the heroine of Deadline look like some nearsighted spice girl or indie rock groupie. She's not.

Remember that annoying girl you were forced to hang out with in high school that always managed to get you beat up for not knowing when to keep her mouth shut? That's her. And you'd be surprised just how refreshing it is to see her in the pages of Deadline.

Sporting baby doll T-shirts and a shiny trench coat, Kat Ferral is a struggling Daily Bugle reporter trying desperately to get off the superhero beat so she can cover crime. Her geek girl look and offbeat humour are rare to find in a female comic character these days, and it's fun to see someone like her hobnob with Bugle pros or supervillains in a nightclub. Her witty tongue has already gotten her in trouble with the Human Torch and her urge to get ahead has just landed her the weirdest story of her life.

Investigating the story of The Judge, a vigilante who kills villains, Kat ends up transported to some



Dawn: Convention Sketchbook

Image

Joseph Michael Linsner

"Dawn standing there with her arms up. Dawn standing there with wings. Dawn standing there, showing her butt at you. Boy, what a boring collection of artwork!" You'd almost think Linsner had his tongue planted firmly in his cheek with this opening salvo for his latest piece of greed for Image. Unfortunately, within the next 50 words you start to see him justifying the existence of this piece of shite and you can read the introduction no further.

He could go on to say how he's kind to animals, or helps old ladies across the road, or gives all the profits from these abominations to Borderline. I'm afraid I just couldn't read on without being violently ill over this display of about 40 poses of Dawn in various states of undress. Jim Valentino should really know better. This belongs in 1990 and at Chaos! Not in 2002 and with a company like Image with a growing good rep.

This is abhorrent. This is everything that is bad about the US comics industry. This is exploitative, badly drawn and quite conceivably the worst $2.95 you may ever waste in your life. Linsner cannot sketch. He needs an art studio, airbrushes, rubbers, assistants, tracing paper - God knows, but whatever he does in his studios to give him that polished look is missing from his sketches like meat from a vegetarian's diet. You can't even call it adolescent wank fantasy because if any teenagers were caught wanking over this they should have their hands chopped off.

Linsner, I've noticed, mentions at the foot of his editorial (that is quickly becoming like an automobile accident to me) that he still hasn't had the chance to "go near Captain America"... Joe, this is because Killraven is a dead property, you could fuck him up till the cows come home, Marvel wouldn't mind and you make them money on the strength of your reputation - which, if there's any justice in this world, should be in tatters. Besides, Captain America doesn't require breast implants, a mass of red hair, and a face that only a paedophile could love.

The Verdict: Kill it. Burn it. Rip it up. And that's in the store. Don't buy the thing! (DRB)

kind of ghost world in this issue, and finds out how The Judge's wife was murdered.

The story itself is kind of bland. While Rosemann's characterization of Kat is fabulously realistic, the plot line is pretty much the standard ghost story. I would have liked to see Kat use her journalism skills and sources more than she has to actually crack the case on her own instead of just being whisked away magically into the middle of it by The Judge. The art is typical Guy Davis art, and while he would have been my last pick for drawing a hero so modern, it compliments Kat's personality perfectly.

The Verdict: Whether this mini-series is successful or not, Marvel should definitely consider throwing Kat into a mainstream book as a supporting character. (MG)

Fantastic Four #57

Marvel

By Adam Warren and Keron Grant

Adam Warren brings his usual brand of humour to The World's Greatest Comics Magazine in the first of three issues that fill the gap between the departure of back-to-basics fan-pleaser Carlos Pacheco and the new guard of Mark Waid - who, let's face it, is likely to deliver more of the same. Warren is a much better writer than he was an artist, and jumps right in on the characterisation, with dialogue that simultaneously parodies the characters and stays completely true to them. The plot itself deals with the Thing's entrapment in, as Mr. Fantastic describes it, "A finite test mini-universe... empty of life save now for Ben, and the berserker children of his skin" as the rocky one starts to sprout hostile mutated copies of himself. If it sounds stupid that's because ... well, it is, but it's also very funny. Short, stand-alone comic relief is what Warren has always been best at. The joke wore thin long ago on his recently-ended extended run on Gen 13, but knowing that this is a finite arc ensures that there's no chance of that happening here. In a medium that spends too much time taking itself too seriously, it's good to see a comic that's not afraid to admit it's a funny book.

The Verdict: Adam Warren delivers light relief with Marvel's first family as The Thing is menaced by mutant copies of himself. (JC)

Forge #3

CrossGen

By various

This is a bit of a dull issue of a top-notch anthology, truth be told. It's no fault of the writers or artists involved, however, but of whoever decides what issues of which comics go in each of the collections. In an unfortunate coincidence, all five of the regular strips feature the sedate "calm before the storm" as they head into more interesting plot developments.

The ironic exception is the underachieving *Crux*. Although it is still marred by being an obvious superhero story in a context where superheroes are inappropriate, and two of the three featured chapters are horribly tedious, Chapter 8 actually brings an interesting development. Whether this is a sign of things to come, or merely a momentary peak in a disappointing series, only time will tell. *Meridian* is hampered by two chapters devoted

to a single event (although it is an important event), plus the bizarre and unnecessary appearance of a character from *Sigil* (currently being collected in Edge). In *Sojourn*, the main characters spend a sixth successive chapter running from Trolls, and in *The Path*, events fail to happen in a desperate fashion. The best strip is still *Negation*, with its intriguing take on the Secret Wars concept, although we are treated to only one chapter this month.

This is still an excellent anthology, and the stories collected this month are good as far as they go. It's just a shame that nothing happens for the whole 272 pages.

The Verdict: Great value, and probably necessary if you're following these series, but a little dull this month. (KG)

Hellblazer #173
Vertigo
By Brian Azzarello and Marcelo Frusin

Just how far would you go to screw over your worst enemy? In the case of John Constantine the answer is, pretty fucking far.

In this issue, the connection between John's charred body, the rich socialite known as S.W. and the S&M club is revealed, as is the fact that John has pulled off one of his most sinister cons to date.

Brian Azzarello's *Ashes and Dust in the City of Angels* is drawing to an end, as is his stint on Hellblazer. Tidying up a bit before Mike Carey takes over, Azzarello has been able to tie together everything from his entire run: from the death that sent John up the river to the bizarre porn story arc involving the redneck brothers to the flashback where a teenage John cons a rich socialite. Like some grand twisted tapestry, Azzarello weaves these seemingly unrelated stories together in ways most readers probably never saw coming, wrapping up loose ends readers didn't even know were untied.

While Azzarello definitely brought back the complete and total bastard aspect to John's persona, with the exception of the *Hard Time* story, the reader didn't get to see inside John's head like we had in the past. John pretty much always played the part of a damned man with a tough and smooth exterior, but his thoughts always revealed him to be riddled with doubts and regrets. While I missed that part of him during Azzarello's run, I realize now that the stories he's written couldn't have been told any other way. This issue reveals the pay-off for this type of storytelling, finally letting us in on what John must have been thinking all this time, and it's completely brilliant.

After such a masterful end, Carey is going to have a whole lot to live up to.

The Verdict: This is exactly what Vertigo was made for. (MG)

Guardian Angel #1
Image
By Jonathan Peterson and Aron Weisenfield

Well, something really stupid happens at the end of this book, and it's a shame. I'll tell you about it.

Guardian Angel #1 introduces us to our hero, Christian Angelos. He's an action movie star who does all of his own stunts - some of which are mighty impressive, I can tell you. He has a pretty girlfriend and lots of money. He buys statues of angels, but he doesn't know why he likes them. And he's being hunted, it seems, by some nasty alien-looking scorpion-type chaps. He's got a lot on.

The book is neatly scripted and nicely drawn. Aron Wiesenfeld's art is part Jim Lee (no surprise there) and part Kevin Maguire (nice surprise there - facial expressions full of character and humour: no bad thing). The book points to an intriguing mystery surrounding our hero and his great-grandfather (a Western lawman), all of which it appears will unfold over the next issue or two. My curiosity is piqued.

And then, at the end of the book, there's an *Image Insider* column telling us who Angelos and the scorpion chaps are, why he's being hunted, and what he's going to do about it. Mystery solved...

Apparently, there'll be a sidekick in issue #2. But no surprises.

The Verdict: Read all of the bits with pictures and none of the bits without. (NM)

The Hood #2
Marvel Max
By Brian K. Vaughan & Kyle Hotz

During a heist gone wrong, Parker Robbins takes out some Crimson Ghost wannabe, steals his costume and discovers that it gives him superpowers. So does Parker use his newfound powers for the greater good and to help his inner city community? Hell, no. Parker is a street punk with a crazy mom in the nut house, a very pregnant girlfriend, and an expensive and demanding mistress. There's no time to fight crime when you can't even make ends meet, so even with superpowers Parker will go right on being what he's always been - a hood.

Marvel Max's The Hood has all the makings of one of the best miniseries of the summer. Using characters both old and new, Brian K. Vaughan sets the stage for a fresh look at the superpower dynamic from street level, where villains are idolized by petty thugs and thieves. It's an origin story that, for once, shows the readers the making of a villain, instead of a hero. The characters are complicated, their dialogue is clever, and their motivations couldn't be more true to life.

Kyle Hotz' art has a cartoonish flair but still remains gritty for the

urban story and setting. Vaughan's story has a great flowing pace and manages to be both funny and bleak at the same time. There's something about Parker's "I'd rather be doing something else" attitude that is reminiscent of James Robinson's Starman, but before you jump to the obvious conclusion that Parker might reform by issue 6, Vaughan goes far out of his way to show that while Parker can be a nice guy, he can be a big jerk, too. You could definitely see him stay a hood for a while and maybe even move up in the supervillain ranks.
The Verdict: A must-read for anyone bored with heroes, real life or otherwise. (MG)

Justice League Adventures #8
DC
By Mike W. Barr, Min S. Ku and Rob Leigh

Somebody - I won't say who - within DC once told me that the Justice League cartoon series had a really great title sequence but was, from that point on, crap. This comic doesn't have a title sequence. It has a plot, but only just; that plot is badly paced and relies way too much on exposition through dialogue. There is functional art illustrating that plot but not clarifying it, and... aah, to be honest it looks like nobody put that much effort into creating this comic; I'm not going to outdo them in the reviewing of it, okay?
The Verdict: Undemanding, in the most negative sense. (MS)

Midnight, Mass. #3
Vertigo
By John Rozum and Jesus Saiz

If there's something strange in your haunted New England neighborhood, don't call on the Kadmons, the local supernatural crime fighters in Midnight, Massachusetts. You're better off on your own. They're hardly the Ghostbusters. They're hardly even Mulder and Scully in their prime.

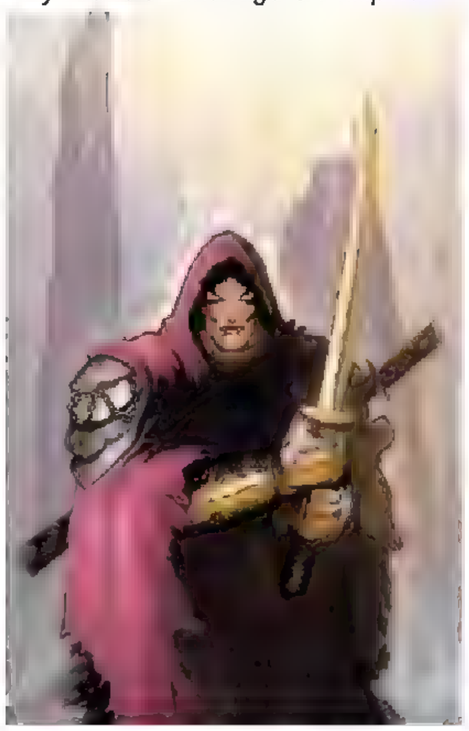
Midnight, Mass.' Adam and Julia Kadmon are supposed to be the premier occult monster fighting couple in the world. A couple so revered for their work that they could just as easily grace the cover of *People* as often as that of *Fangoria*. But so far, all they've done in this miniseries is screw up a lot. Adam can't punch his way out of a paper bag and depends on his wife to do all the monster ass-whooping. Meanwhile, Julia can't remember a spell or incantation to save her life - literally. They've already managed to kill two assistants and some monsters seem more starstruck by them than scared. This may be John Rozum's hasty attempt at characterization and sub-plot, but it just makes the couple come off as being incompetent and unprepared.

Even if they *are* unprepared fiend-hunting amateurs, they should still be able to kick the hell out of the Midnight, Mass. monsters. Most of them look like oversized Pokemon or mutant rejects from Xavier's mansion.

Even though the story is weak, the concept just screams "television show", and I really wouldn't be surprised at all to see this land a timeslot between other DC ventures on the WB, especially now that the *X-Files* primetime sci-fi void needs to be filled.

Jesus Saiz's art has a great sense of movement between panels which makes for easy to read fight scenes and Tomer Hanuka's covers have all been eye catching, but some seem to tell a different story from what's going on inside. Actually, they seem to be telling a better story than what's going on inside.
The Verdict: Buy it for the pretty covers and make up your own story. (MG)

Mutant Earth #1a
Image Comics
By Francis Takenaga & Philip Tan



The setting: a post-apocalyptic future Earth. The human race lives on its knees, enslaved by aliens and mutants. The last survivors of Earth scrape together a meagre existence, in yoke to their vicious conquerors. A lone hero, one last brave soul, rises from the remains of humanity, a solitary light against the darkness. The very survival of our species may rest on his lonely shoulders.

Or perhaps the one light in the sorry lives of our post-apocalypse chums is that they don't have to read this nonsense. Please make no mistake, it's appalling. The

Love and Rockets #4
Fantagraphics
By Los Bros Hernandez

When Love and Rockets was revived in comicbook format I was at first worried that the shift away from magazine size might also entail some loss of intensity, perhaps even some attempt to cater a little more to mainstream tastes. I needn't have worried; if anything the format change heightens the strength of the material by setting it up for comparison with so much of what usually appears in that shape and size of pamphlet.

Mario's story of an executive lost in the wilderness – both natural and political – kicks off this issue and demonstrates the point by coming closer than anything else in it to standard comicbook fare. But that's only by comparison with the rest of the book; slowly but surely it's gathering momentum and sustaining interest, and the writing is in any event sharper and better observed than you'll find in most spandex stories.

The rest of the comic is filled with that wild, addictive mix of "slice of life" and fantasy which fans of Jaime and Beto know to expect but which forever turns to slightly unexpected twists. There's no room here to do justice to it all, but I can't resist noting Jaime's steady adherence to strict panel grids, an 8 panel per page one in the two stories of Maggie and Hopey, and a more expansive 6 panel one for a darkly good-humoured tale of lust and love in which the partners turn out to be not quite who you expected. The grid format gives these episodes a relentless rhythm - most impressively in a two page episode where Maggie drives Izzy home at night, just two people talking fractiously in a car in the dark, with hellhounds all too clearly on their trail. For such a brief and lightless piece it's astonishingly intense, the steady rhythm of the layout clashing with the arrhythmic ebb and flow of the conversation in a way which both grates and fascinates.

Los Bros and Love and Rockets are still right on the cutting edge of US comics, no doubt about that.
The Verdict: If you aren't reading this comic already, why on earth not?!? (MK)

apocalypse had better come soon, because if issue #2 ever sees print, I'm levering my eyes out with a fork. Anything would be preferable to reading another episode of this derivative, lazy sci-fi insult.
The Verdict: Abhorrent. (NM)

Spider-Man: Quality Of Life #1
Marvel
By Greg Rucka and Scott Christian Sava

Someone tell me this isn't the future of comicbook art. Because - at risk of sounding all Luddite - it's horrible, and it frightens me. It frightens me that anybody can think it's a good idea to use cartoon CGI images to try and tell a serious story. Here we have sequences featuring the gradual disintegration of Curt Connors' family - his wife is dying, his son is rebelling - and it all looks like a *Wallace & Gromit* adventure. I'm sure a hell of a lot of hard work went into realising these images - there's no denying the level of artistry involved - but the style seems inappropriate for anything weightier than *Toy Story*.

Trying to look beyond the art at Greg Rucka's first Spidey script - and it's difficult, it really is - we get an amusing opening battle (although Mr. Bendis' lawyers might want to examine some of that dialogue), a by-the-numbers Bugle chapter, and an intriguing corporate science plotline. Ironically, the best writing comes in the scenes with Connors and his family - it's just a shame they all look like *X-Box* extras.

The Verdict: I used to think it didn't matter what the art looked like, as long as the story was strong. I was wrong. (RH)

Adventures of Superman #605
DC
By Joe Casey and Carlos Meglia

Don't bother with the story. It's the third part of three, it's about eight pages' worth of plot ridiculously over-extended, and if you haven't read Morrison and Quitely's JLA: Earth 2 graphic novel you won't be able to make the slightest sense of it anyway.

I think you need to see the art, though. At first glance I thought it was a feverish mess of warring influences - a touch of manga here, a lot of computer game graphics there, more than a hint of the Paul Dini/Bruce Timm animated style - but then I went back and read it again. And again. You have no idea how unusual it is for me to read a new superhero comic three times within 24 hours...

Maybe all that drew me back was simple astonishment at finding such an extreme, totally non-realistic art style in one of the oldest and most definitively mainstream American comicbooks there is - I don't know, I haven't decided yet. But there is something very striking and memorable about the way Carlos Meglia isn't even trying to make the characters look remotely human, and I think it's that he's made a logical reduction of superhero art conventions to their iconic basics and, in the process, chucked most of the conventions away. It makes sense, and it

Transformers: Generation One #3
Dreamwave
By Chris Sarracini and Pat Lee

It's official: I hate this travesty of a comic. I understand that this is a brand new start and that comparisons to previous Transformers series are not really relevant, but having received a copy of Titan's Primal Scream TPB recently, I could not help looking back and confirming that yes, the old comic had characters that made sense; and no, the plot usually wasn't intolerably incoherent. True, the art this time around is better but I'm starting to believe that the art is the only reason this exists and that the writing has little attention paid to it. No offence to writer Chris Sarracini, but his contribution here shows a fundamental misunderstanding of both the characters and the basic principles of plotting. What we have here is a pointless fight scene with the occasional bit of nonsense thrown in. Megatron, evil tyrant of the universe, portrayed in every single previous incarnation of Transformers as an insane and heartless bastard, here reveals that his Grand Master Plan™is to turn our world into a copy of Cybertron because he's... er... homesick. How very evil of him. Nonetheless, his plan convinces Grimlock to switch sides and become a Decepticon, despite the fact that his new friends spend most of their time kicking around the head of one of his old friends. The master plan seems to involve sucking out the brains of captive Autobots and humans (and still Grimlock doesn't mind?) and converting them into a silver mud which inexplicably changes Earth into a metal planet. How this works is left completely unexplained.

Optimus Prime, wisest and noblest of all Transformers, is forced by an angry human to admit that "justice has once again sent out its beacon", showing that Mr Sarracini has mistaken Prime for Superman. This is obviously very easy to do, since one is a giant robot and one isn't... I'm puzzled as to why Dreamwave decided to resurrect the classic Transformers when all they have kept is the designs (and in some cases, not even that). These characters are unrecognisable as anything but incoherent, babbling madmen.

Previous Transformers writer Simon Furman revealed in a Borderline interview that he was working on a prequel to this series. Perhaps that will explain what's going on and who these characters are, because I don't know, and neither does the writer. Even considering that this is a fresh approach to the Transformers concept, there's no excuse for the ineffective plotting. The silver mud device and the plot twists, which seem to exist only because the writer thinks plot twists are interesting rather than because they make sense in the context of the plot, are inexcusable in a supposedly professional comic. Pretty as the art is, it cannot cover up the scrappy writing, especially when it too is flawed, as this issue reveals. The art looks tired and shoddy in places, and just wrong in others - see Megatron's dislocated arm on page 9, and his dislocated head on page twelve!

I've tried to be fair and not compare it to the classic Transformers comic, but this seems to have made that an unnecessary worry by being substandard all by itself.
The Verdict: Is pretty "big robot" art worth wading through writing this scrappy? Not for me, but you'll have to decide for yourself. (KG)

works; after all, you *know* that the object in the Superman costume is Superman, so why should you have to be reminded of that by a realistic depiction?

Meglia, I'm sure, knows exactly what he's doing. He may be new to American comicbooks but he's been drawing all kinds of comics in his native Argentina for almost three decades, including a superhero series which shows some of the characteristics of the style he's using here but isn't so extreme, so out on the edge. Perhaps the extremity is partly due to his having been handed such a flimsy story to draw, but there I'm guessing again. What I know is that he's trying something new and different for US comics, and that it's looking good and exciting to me. Put the man on a Vertigo book, DC, with a writer who can deliver some solid storytelling - I'd really like to see what Meglia could do in those circumstances.

The Verdict: I can't tell whether I love Meglia's art or hate it, but I find it exciting – and that's more than I can say for most modern superhero art. (MK)

Thunderbolts #65
Marvel
By Fabian Nicieza and Patrick Zircher

Thunderbolts' fortnightly summer schedule kicks off with a touching character-led focus on Hawkeye. With most of his team missing presumed (by him) dead, Clint is left to reflect on the ideas and ideals that have always been at this series' core. Its inevitable "story so far" round up results in a great jumping-on point for new readers, and a sentimental - though never mawkish - reminder for the regulars that how and where the fuzzy, movable line between good and evil is positioned has always been the heart of this remarkable series. Five years ago, it might have seemed that a concept as simple as "supervillains have a go at reforming; moral ambiguity ensues" would wear thin pretty quickly, but at 65 issues strong it shows no signs of running out of steam yet.

The Verdict: If you're still not

buying Thunderbolts, you should be. You really should be. (JC)

2000AD Megazine #4.12
Rebellion
By various

I haven't read the Megazine since its slightly dodgy third incarnation, full of Preacher and *Daily Star* reprints. Some spare cash and a wonderful Mark Harrison cover picture of the delightful Durham Red won me over. It has to be said that this is a very slick package indeed. It is somewhat reminiscent of the early 90s strip anthologies like Meltdown, with its nice balance of articles and strips. Obviously, the strips outweigh the articles, but the articles included are interesting and lengthy, and make for a pleasant accompaniment to the strips.

Of those strips, the cover-featured *Durham Red* story is a disappointment, having none of the over-the-top craziness of the character's more recent 2000AD appearances. The main *Dredd* strip, while relying too heavily on *Citizen Kane* for inspiration/ironic comment, has the beginnings of a nice mystery, the kind of thing the lengthier Megazine can do much better than its weekly cousin. *Missionary Man* continues to fail to live up to the potential within the concept, as it did in 2000AD, but John Ridgway's fine art makes it an attractive read if nothing else. *Bad Company* is entertaining, but I for one do not see what the fuss was about.

The highlights in this issue are a second *Judge Dredd* strip and the continuing reprints of *Hellboy: Seed of Destruction*. The first pokes some very welcome fun at the overinflated ego of George Lucas and the bizarre cult that has formed around his little space movies. This is a "Dredd as bit player in his own story" strip done very well, as Dredd stands back, probably rolling his eyes, as the insanity commences. *Hellboy*, despite being scripted by John Byrne, is very entertaining indeed, although not enough of it is reprinted here! Mike Mignola's minimalist yet moody art is a joy to behold, which only makes it more annoying that we only get fourteen pages of it. I certainly won't wait so long before I get another issue of the Megazine if this is what it's like now!

The Verdict: A bit disappointing because the *Durham Red* story is weak, but nonetheless a wonderful package. Has the Megazine finally achieved its true potential? (KG)

ZINE SEEN

The Dinosaurs Are Coming!
The A-Men
By Shaky Kane
Wishbone Studio
(Contact 01392 256070)

Mutant spawn of the unholy lusts between Jack Kirby, Geof Darrow and Ted McKeever, hidden uber-god of Britcom bizarritude, the nearly forgotten creature Man once called Shaky Kane throws back his scaled head and roars again in two flamethrower blasts of comics hysteria. The A-Men collects Kane's strips from dear dead Deadline: God's cops prowl the darkness of your soul and the corpse of Jesus floats in space while Black Elvis slumps and an industry is born. They said Shaky Kane couldn't draw, but back then, who could?

The Dinosaurs Are Coming kills that calumny as new modern Kane, brandishing the twin hammers of draughtsmanship and storytelling, whaps doubters with power and accuracy. These may not be the most refined of comics, but who needs extended pinkies? If only there was a way to actually buy them.

The Verdict: Somebody offer proper distribution to these – the Exeter City Council will be your friends forever if you do. (MS)

Frontiers #1
(£1 for 20 A5 pages from Tony McGee, 143 Meldon Drive, Bilston, W. Midlands, UK. WV14 8BE)

The older I get, the less time I have for science fiction. More and more, it seems like the refuge of lazy creators who would rather spend their time on effects instead of character, spectacle instead of plot. How the freaky alien looks has become more important than how he feels. Blame George Lucas, but maybe there's no place for human beings in space any more.

Then, just when I'm about to give up on the genre altogether, along comes Frontiers. Sure, there are deep space mining expeditions, dreamscreens, genetech and an impending "end of the universe" scenario… but in this book, they're secondary to the people. A lonely young miner, adrift in the emptiness of space with only a photograph for company; a strange and different woman, held for questioning by the police, who has more answers than they might like. Because these characters engage us, we care more about the sci-fi elements as they're slowly revealed. The art helps – Tony McGee has a knack for capturing subtleties of statement and gesture.

The Verdict: John Wyndham would be proud – Tony McGee has found a still-beating heart in science fiction. (RH)

The Jock #1
By Rol Hirst and Nigel Lowrey
(www.angelfire.com/comics/thejock/)

The original run of The Jock is

legendary in small press circles, and finally, a few months ago, I managed to read the thing. It's a truly remarkable project, a sci-fi story about music and dystopia, with brilliant art and wonderful characters, that spookily pre-empted both Preacher and The Matrix,

among others. If there were flaws, they were that the art spoiled the reader, being better than your average small press title, but not quite as good as the professional stuff (although this was the early '90s, so in hindsight it probably *was* better than the professional stuff!); and that it was obvious at times that the writer didn't know where the story was going. Both problems have been resolved in this rebooted version. Artist Nigel Lowrey has honed his style so that it *is* now at a professional level, and Rol Hirst has found consistency and structure in his writing.

They have chosen to release this version as an intriguing hybrid of webcomic and printed matter. The format is as a printed comic, but it is currently only available online. This new version of The Jock is very polished indeed. The story starts off in an interesting way, and there is enough of both set-up and action to keep newcomers and veterans happy. The issue ends with a joke which works really very well considering that comics are a silent medium. Hats off to both writer and artist for making it work. There is enough here to leave the reader wanting more. If they've encountered The Jock before, they'll want to see how things have changed, and if they're new to the title, then they'll want to know more about this strange world and these interesting people.

The only flaw with this first issue, and it is a minor one, has to do with the lettering. The creators are using specialised lettering styles to denote whispered asides and other vocal "special effects", but since these lettering styles are unique to this comic, it may take a while for a reader to work out exactly what it means when a character's speech is presented as typewritten text, for instance. Perhaps a key may be a useful addition to the web site. That aside, this is a very welcome and very successful return for one of the British small press' best titles.

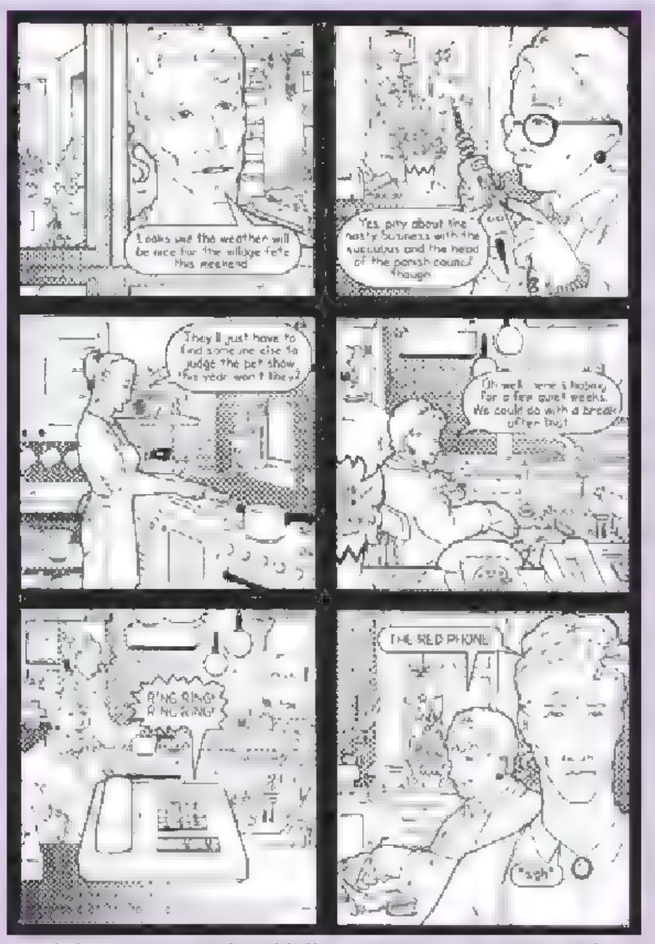
The Verdict: Essentially free, and very good indeed, so you have no excuse to not be reading! (KG)

Oddcases: "The Case Of The Haunted Drag Bar"

By Alistair Pulling & Bevis Musson (online at http://www.opi8.com/sequence/oddcases/oddcases.php*)*

One of an infinite variety of free small press comics available at June's Bristol Convention, Oddcases is a warm, witty affair full of gentle characterisation, satisfying plot twists and "feel good" humour. Pulling's economically told story concerns Clarissa and Jani - a pair of eccentric, middle-aged paranormal investigators who bear more than a passing resemblance to Clarissa Dickson Wright and (the late) Jennifer Paterson of *Two Fat Ladies* TV chef fame. Crikey, they even zip around in a motorbike and sidecar!

The familiarity of the characters works in Pulling's favour, enabling him to whisk you straight into a world of quaint Englishness awash with parish councils, cricket on the green and warm beer that is both convincing and nicely understated. He then deftly pulls off a further trick, transplanting our protagonist sleuths from the stopped-clock atmosphere of a country village straight into a gay bar with a ghost problem. One minute you're wondering whether the story's going to involve a haunted W.I. meeting or a ghost cat stuck in a tree, the next you're up to your


Looks like the weather will be nice for the village fete this weekend
Yes, pity about the nasty business with the succubus and the head of the parish council though
They'll just have to find someone else to judge the pet show this year won't they?
Oh well, we're happy for a few quiet weeks. We could do with a break after that
RING RING RING RING
THE RED PHONE

neck in men wearing Kylie crop tops and sequins! In the hands of a lesser writer such a switch could have seemed clunky and incongruous, but Pulling, er, pulls it off.

The most satisfying thing about Oddcases, though, is its restrained but nevertheless powerful repudiation of homophobia and prejudice. Pulling clearly doesn't go in for chest-beating diatribes on man's inhumanity to man, and this is all the better for it - its climax is a subtle, sensitive and smile-inducing affirmation of decency and humanity.

Pulling's words are bought to clear, crackling life by Musson's art. The Manchester-based illustrator, best known for his Queen Of Diamonds character, goes a little heavy on the duotone at times, but makes up for it with a couple of lovingly detailed splash pages and a pleasing range of styles that are testament to his versatility and imagination.

The Verdict: Miss Marple meets *Queer As Folk* by way of Hellblazer. Bloody odd and bloody good. (AW)

The O Men #15

(£1.50 for 32 A5 pages from Martin Eden, 19a Trevelyan Road, Tooting, London SW17 9LS)

As with a lot of super-hero team books, the better issues of The O Men are the ones in which the focus is homed in on just one or two characters. The enigmatic Miss Scarlet has always been the most appealing O person, so it's great to see her given the spotlight here. This issue also makes sense of certain other subplots, which, till now, seemed unconnected. It's some of Eden's strongest writing to date - and his most striking artwork, particularly the simple, scarlet cover. It's also a 'turning point' for the popular character that reconciles her darker exterior with a more vulnerable interior. And it's a good reminder why this book has been twice nominated for an Eagle Award.

The Verdict: The issue a lot of O Men fans have been waiting for is a good place for new readers to jump onboard. (RH)

Thrud The Barbarian #1
By Carl Critchlow
(Available for £2.60 (including p&p) from Thrud The Barbarian, P.O. Box 371, Southport PR8 6YE)

Veteran fans of *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Traveller* will no doubt remember Thrud from his days as a regular monthly strip in *White Dwarf*, the bible of RPG geeks everywhere. Anyway, somewhere along the line Thrud and the WD gang must have parted company, leaving everyone's second favourite barbarian homeless, and that's the way he's stayed... until now. Yep, Thrud's back and this time he's got his very own full-colour, 28-page comic courtesy of his original creator.

Unfortunately, while Carl Critchlow is an undoubtedly fine artist, a decent colourist and a fun, linear storyteller, his creation hasn't aged well. In fact, it's probably safe to say that in 2002 a Conan The Barbarian pastiche is at best a pointless anachronism, at worst about as welcome as a turd in a swimming pool. Thankfully, comics have moved on a bit since the days when fans convulsed with laughter at magicians with funny names (To-Me Ku-Pa, in this case) and gags about Robert E. Howard's jockstrap.

Christ, some idiot will probably bring back Transformers and the bloody Micronauts next. Oh...

The Verdict: Like Watchmen never happened. (AW)

Zulu: Water Cart Rescue #1
By Colin Mathieson
(Available for £1.95 from M56 Comics, 8 Stelfox Avenue, Timperley, Cheshire WA15 6UL)

Water Cart Rescue focusses on the bloody battle between the Zulus and the British army at Rorke's Drift on January 22 1879 (yep, just like that film with Michael Caine in it). Suffice to say, this is a highly unusual and enormously welcome subject for a comicbook and as such should be applauded.

Writer/artist Mathieson should also be commended for his mostly even-handed approach to the material. Although the story is told almost exclusively from the viewpoint of British soldiers, he at least attempts to put the Zulus' side of the conflict, including a rather touching scene in which one of the Brits asks a fellow soldier, "If your monarch was threatened... your country invaded... and your friends killed, would you give up?" He also dedicates the issue to the Zulu warriors who died during the Rorke's Drift conflagration.

Unfortunately, he doesn't get it right all the time and there's certainly an unpleasant contrast between the way in which the British invaders are portrayed (loyalty and comradeship between officers and soldiers valued above all else) and one particular scene where a bloodthirsty Zulu leader is seen slaughtering one of his own men. Of course, the British army would never do any such thing...

At best the writing and art is fairly unsophisticated, but what Mathieson loses in realism and style he easily makes up for with his ability to articulate the heady sense of togetherness and fear amongst the British soldiers. One of his neat art tricks is to draw his characters' eyes slightly larger than they should be, thereby amplifying the terror and desperation etched onto the soldiers' faces. Simple but effective.

The Verdict: Ten-out-of-ten for the challenging subject matter, a little less for its execution. (AW)

VERDICT COLLECTED EDITION

Scatterbrain
Dark Horse Maverick
By various

This is a non-superhero humour collection from Dark Horse offering 128 pages of eclectic comics in a hardcover, full colour, large size format. With twenty-six different authors, there is something of interest for everyone. Besides big names such as Sergio Aragones and Mike Mignola it presents unknown artists ranging through a wide variety of styles. As always in such a publication, not all are of the same quality - indeed, the graphism ranges from nice clear lines to totally messy scribbling. But it is not so much the art but the stories that are a real disappointment. Indeed, several are weak, dull and some are even total non-sense - or if they had a sense, I failed to see what was funny. The enthusiasm that first appeared while browsing the book quickly faded after the first reading.

Although this lack of uniform quality throughout the book is disappointing, the courage of Dark Horse in coming up with a publication that doesn't tell the story of superheroes saving the galaxy once more is refreshing and a welcome change. The work of some artists boringly repeats itself several times in this volume and publishing more different artists would have been more interesting – but it is nevertheless an interesting beginning. Don't expect to burst out

Nowheresville
Image
By Mark Ricketts with Galen Showman

In his introduction to Nowheresville, Brian Michael Bendis says of Mark Ricketts, "no bullshit – he's the smartest person in comics." (Oh, to damn with faint praise...) I've never seen Ricketts in a pub quiz or played him at Trivial Pursuit, so I couldn't comment on Bendis' assertion, but what is clear from Nowheresville is that Ricketts is definitely a bright talent.

Set in bohemian 1958 New York, Nowheresville opens with the murder of Ms. Bobbee, a burlesque dancer and sometime pornographer's model. The story follows two freaky beatniks, Chic Mooney and Mr Queeg, who begin investigating the murder as inspiration for Queeg's first pulp novel. Their inquiries take them from beatnik poetry nights to mob-run strip joints in Ricketts' wonderfully rich and textured New York.

The most intriguing aspect of the book is the journey taken by Queeg and Mooney into the latter's past. As two more murders occur, we learn that Mooney's involvement is more than just as inspiration for Queeg's "zen detective". Easily Nowheresville's most involving character, Mooney's morality sets him apart from most of the characters the two encounter, each of them selfish, jealous and bitter, all of them well-rounded and expertly realised by Ricketts.

Rickett's unfussy art lends the book a *noir* feel and effortlessly evokes the proto-psychedelic feel of the beatnik underground. His storytelling is faultless, making the unravelling of this complex murder mystery a joy. Apparently, he has volumes of finished but unpublished material, read only by industry insiders. On the evidence of Nowheresville, I think we could all benefit from a look.

The Verdict: Go and buy it. Then read it. Then lend it to a friend and go and buy another one, because they won't give it back. (NM)

laughing as you would do with a MAD magazine, though; here the humour is less subtle, more raw, crude or non-existent.

However, I hope this publication will be followed by others, and that American publishers will have the courage to produce similar books in the future.

The Verdict: A beautifully crafted, affordable publication containing an eclectic collection of comics but with weak stories. (PL)

Ultimate X-Men. Volume 2: Return To Weapon X
Marvel
By Mark Millar & various

It's hard to get used to an X-book that tells a complete story in six issues without untying so many plot-threads even old snikt-claws couldn't knit them back together... but that's just what Mark Millar seems to be trying to do - and largely succeeding in -with Ultimate X-Men. So here we have the Ultimate universe's *Weapon X* story - and surprisingly, Wolverine himself takes a backseat for much of this adventure. Millar entwines plot twists and character development expertly, and at breakneck pace, working in a Storm/Beast romance; Hank's blue-furred transformation; a potentially Phoenix-raising decision for Marvel Girl; and the debuts of Ultimate Nightcrawler, Rogue and Juggernaut, among others. Inevitably some characters get short shrift, with Millar relying on fanbase familiarity rather than giving all the new muties proper introductions (what about the new readers?), while devoting more energy to his new too-cool-for-school Nick Fury.

Meanwhile, as if to make us appreciate Adam Kubert more, Marvel drafts in some dull fill-in artists for a couple of episodes... fortunately, the Joe Kubert-inked flashback almost makes up for this.

Grumbles aside, this is a rattling mutant thriller, full of offbeat Millar moments (including a soldier sticking out his tongue to drink Storm's raindrops!).

The Verdict: The sort of story Chris Claremont would have stretched out over ten years... sealed up in six fast issues. (RH)

Visions of Japan
I.M.A.
By Xavier Gros, Atsuko Koga and Chiharu Nagatani

Published by I.M.A., a non-profit association, Visions of Japan is a rather unusual publication collecting humorous and satirical comic strips about Japan. At first glance the drawing is not exceptional, but it is well suited for these short stories that reveal different aspects of Japanese society.

The authors tried to give an image of Japan that goes beyond the usual stereotypes perceived in most books, and I believe they have succeeded. Both authors and publisher are taking a risk in producing such a comic, that doesn't always reveal good sides of Japan. In addition, the market for satire comic strips is rather limited.

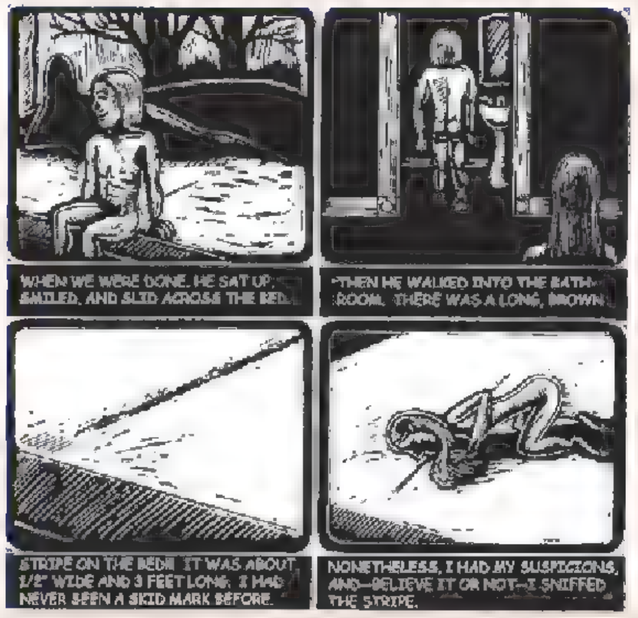
The book starts with an insightful essay that describes how Japan is perceived in western comics and in Japanese comics. Even if you are not into manga or Japan, both the essay and the strips make this publication an enjoyable read. Don't expect superheroes or violence, this has a more relaxing atmosphere – a bit like Japan - where the only extravagance lies in the main character: Gaijin-san. American and incapable of either speaking Japanese or understanding Japanese society, it is through his eyes and daily life experiences that the reader discovers a hidden Japan.

Also worth noting is that the book is published in English, but contains a French and Japanese translation. And for only £8.00 including postage, this 128 page limited edition comic is rather good value for money. The only drawback is that it is not available in comic shops and can only be ordered by mail order directly from the publisher (*imangaa@yahoo.co.uk*).

The Verdict: For a critical look at Japanese society, this well designed comic book is worth reading even if you are not into manga. (PL)

Western
Le Lombard
By Jean Van Hamme and Grzegorz Rosinski

Polish expatriate Rosinski won fame and fortune in the West with his


WHEN WE WERE DONE, HE SAT UP, SMILED, AND SLID ACROSS THE BED.
-THEN HE WALKED INTO THE BATH-ROOM. THERE WAS A LONG, BROWN
STRIPE ON THE BED!! IT WAS ABOUT 1/2" WIDE AND 3 FEET LONG. I HAD NEVER SEEN A SKID MARK BEFORE.
NONETHELESS, I HAD MY SUSPICIONS, AND--BELIEVE IT OR NOT--I SNIFFED THE STRIPE.

Dirty Stories Volume 3
Fantagraphics/Eros Comix
By various

This is sex. The lead up. The foreplay. The penetration. The act. The climax. The afterglow. And quite possibly the damp patch. This is Dirty Stories 3, pure and simple - you even see a defined orgasmic line drawn about 4/5ths of the way through.

I have a lot of respect for a publication as brave as this. From the cover - a shit-eating waiter - to detailed pictures of the internal workings of the male and female reproductive systems, this is not a wank book, by any stretch of the imagination... and frankly if anybody found anything in this erotic enough to masturbate over, then Eros does far more explicit stuff. Yet, you can't get more *overt* than the examples on offer in this collection.

From Mack White's Solano Lopez tribute to Carol Swain's disturbing tale of retirement home porn, this collection lays its cards on the table then almost yanks them away with Rick Altergott's *Mile High Club*, which is essentially four pages of fingering and fucking, but actually tells a story very simply and very beautifully. The contributors veer from symbolism, with Renee French's *11.35*, to outright misogyny with Nono Kadaver's repulsive *Dandruff*, both of which are high points of the book. The other excellent strips include *Teenage Lust* by Pat Moriarty, which is so reminiscent of Tex Avery and Robert Crumb, Penny Van Horn's wickedly funny *The Biggest One I've Ever Seen* and Matthias Lehmann's *Introduction*, although you'd be hard pressed to find a reason why it is even in an anthology called Dirty Stories (unless you have a problem with stinky feet...).

The Verdict: The real shame is that this book will be seen by too few people - and not even the majority of them will be the right audience for this poignant and fitting addition to an already worthy line of Dirty Stories. (DRB)

hyper-realistic drawing of the mediaeval/barbarian fantasy series Thorgal, written by the ever prolific and adaptable Van Hamme. For this one-shot special edition venture, though, he abandons the pencil, pen and inks, turning instead to the paintbrush and canvas for a dour look at the rural American West in the last years of the 19th century.

The laconic title is telling; Van Hamme and Rosinski appear to be aiming for a summation of a concept here, one which, like a Sergio Leone movie placed up against a Roy Rogers feature, peels back the romanticism which clothes popular European Western series like Jerry Spring and even Blueberry to reveal the brutish nastiness beneath. The brutishness may be no more realistic than the romanticism – but what's interesting is that Rosinski has turned to a highly impressionistic painting style to deal with it, and that the impressionism doesn't soften the story's callousness in any way.

Van Hamme's scenario is that of a revenge tragedy, in which a sullen, outcast waif grows up to become a gunman who insinuates himself into the affections of a family that, years earlier, killed his older brother. He gets his comeuppance, everything ends unhappily for everyone... it's standard Western *noir*, although unredeemed by even the dubious heroism of an Eastwood or a Bronson, and it hits all the correct notes with consummate professionalism. It wouldn't mean half so much without Rosinski's inspired paintings, though. Except in the splendid double page wordless pictures which serve as punctuation between the chapters, Rosinski confines himself to the harshest of palettes, never moving far away from drab browns, grays and yellows which both remind one of sepia-tinted photographs and accentuate the story's essential grubbiness. The result hardly makes for pleasant, let alone edifying, reading - but it makes Western a very powerful and grimly memorable piece of work.

The Verdict: A fine "spaghetti Western" comic; dark, impressionistic and not recommended for the hopeless romantic. (MK)

CLASSIC TRADE PAPERBACK: The Compleat Sally Forth

Fantagraphics

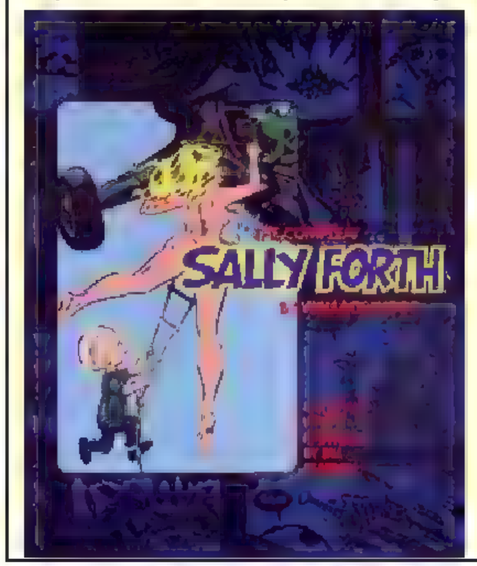
By Wallace Wood and Nicola Cuti

There's no avoiding the fact that Wally Wood's early 1970s T&A strip is as sexist as anything - after all, the only directive given to Wood and Cuti by the commissioning magazine, the G.I. *Overseas Weekly*, was that a drawing of a naked girl should appear on every page! There may be an intriguing comment on standards of post-Comics Code story plotting buried in Nick Cuti's introductory comment that it became a real chore trying to manage that within a coherent plotline... but manage it they did. So if the act of drawing naked idealised women specifically to cater to the, um, interests of G.I.s stationed overseas strikes you as inherently offensive, then this isn't the trade paperback for you.

In fact, it may be that most modern readers of comics are likely to be more offended by the fact that the heroine is presented, in spades, as the archetypal "dumb blonde". The exploits of Sally Forth are as innocent as those of her obvious predecessor, Norman Pett's wartime *Daily Mirror* heroine Jane, but where Jane's scripting frequently accorded to her an intelligence that contrasted with her problems in remaining clothed, Sally is allowed not even the slightest glimmer of intelligence. Nor, in fact, are any of the other female characters in the book; this is a old fashioned man's fantasy world, one in which women are there to be decorative and nothing else.

So why is this obviously reprehensible piece of sexist old garbage being dignified by a "classic trade paperback" review? Wally Wood's many fans already know the answer to that; it's chock full of sumptuously gorgeous black and white art. While it isn't acceptable to objectify women and just look at them, we have no such scruples about art - and if you think that's an absurd statement, perhaps a reminder of Wood's tragic life and premature death will emphasise the point that art is, after all, the life's work and creative outpouring of human beings. And yet we see nothing problematic about treating it as just another commodity... just as middle aged men in the 1970s saw nothing outrageous in treating women as decorations...

Still, leaving the ideological tangles aside, Sally Forth may show us Wood's art at less than its best but it is still a thing of awesome design and beautiful rendering. During the strip's three year existence the creators drove it through a series of movie-based genre satires which enabled Wood to draw a full range of settings, from outer space to Transylvania, from jungles to cityscapes. In doing so he famously employed an enormous "swipe file" of photographic reference material, but does that really matter? The swipes are all subordinated to a peerless sense of pictorial storytelling; they only enhance the art, they don't take anything away from its artistry. And the artistry of one of the most skilled and striking practitioners in the history of American comicbooks is well worth studying in its own right.



An early '90s comicbook reprinting by Fantagraphics literally hacked this series to pieces, leaving out huge chunks, reducing it to an incoherent wank book for the hopelessly desperate and arguably abusing the artist's work as much as that work may be perceived as abusing women. But with this beautifully produced and low priced tabloid-sized collection they redeemed themselves, and finally allowed the reader to appreciate Sally Forth for what it is; a lightweight, freewheeling sequence of genre satires which may be ideologically dated and even offensive, but which amounts to a master class in stylish, graceful composition of comic strips. That it's also a classic collection of T&A artwork is just icing on the cake – or an insidious poison, depending on how you want to look at it.

The Verdict: Sexist? Yep. Dated? Certainly. A wide-ranging anthology of the work of a master cartoonist? Absolutely. Art? You decide. (MK)

BEAUTIFUL LOSERS

SLINGERS
Marvel Comics
12 issues - 1998-1999

Lionised by the critics, loved by a small hardcore of fans, completely ignored by everybody else – we look at the comics series which vanished far too quickly. This month: Jenni Cole looks at the Spider-Man spin-off that sadly spluttered and sank... Slingers.

I'M not going to sit here and claim that **Slingers** was a work of genius. It wasn't. If it's destined to be remembered at all, it's as one of those bargain bin gems - a compact series that's worth a look if you're a comics obsessive who's got a rainy afternoon to spare and really nothing better to do with your life. It's just fun. Good, old-fashioned, Marvel superhero fun.

Slingers follows the adventures of a group of teenagers who acquire, from a mysterious benefactor, superhero costumes (and the powers built into them) that once belonged to Spider-Man. I really don't think it's intentional on the part of writer Joseph Harris, but once kitted out in kevlar and Spandex, the quartet really do come across as the most incompetent bunch of clueless fuckwits ever to venture onto New York's rooftops. And herein lies the series' charm as an accidental black comedy.

Much of the "action" takes place on various New York city rooftops as the team-mates attempt to practice the use of their powers. This includes jumping/flying from one roof to another. When one of them screws this up, the survivors spend the next few issues agonising about whether to report it to the police or not. They have to be reminded, constantly, that calling each other by their real names when in costume might just be a risk to their secret identities. Virtually everything they do, they mess up. Big time. It's hilarious and, in its own clumsy way, more reminiscent of the teenage angst on which Marvel built its Silver Age than anything anyone could have planned intentionally. Because it isn't tongue-in-cheek. It isn't **Big Bang Comics**. It's meant to be taken seriously.

The novelty of such rank stupidity would probably wear off pretty quickly if it wasn't for the fact that the comic has some genuine plus points as well. The characterisation, though hardly ground-breaking or cutting edge, is decent superhero soap. In Johnny 'Ricochet' Gallo, a mutant who'd prefer his team-mates didn't discover that his powers aren't all in his costume, there's a chance to look at the mutant issue from a slightly different perspective. The "arrogant to hide his insecurities" Ritchie 'Prodigy' Gilmore, dead Goth ghost-thing Cassie 'Dusk' St. Commons and Eddie 'Hornet' McDonough, whose costume compensates for physical disabilities - not to mention their senile, bitter and possibly psychotic mentor the Black Marvel - might seem like identikit Marvel superheroes, but they won this old Marvelite's sympathies pretty quickly. Their interactions with one another and the world they've been thrust into are believable and fun. Amid the seasoned and competent Avengers and FF, it's a novelty to have a superhero team who really don't have a clue what they're doing but are determined to keep doing it anyway.

In a way, the obvious debt **Slingers** owes to 60s Lee, Kirby and Ditko plots is its blessing and its curse. It's old fashioned, it's safe and predictable, and there's no way it was ever going to survive in an industry that's been flooded with books just like it for more than 40 years. But it was Marvel at its most Marvelesque - angst-ridden teens, superheroes who weren't perfect in or out of costume, and a willingness to put characterisation before endless fight scenes. It was a nice comic, but who wants to be the nice kid's best friend?

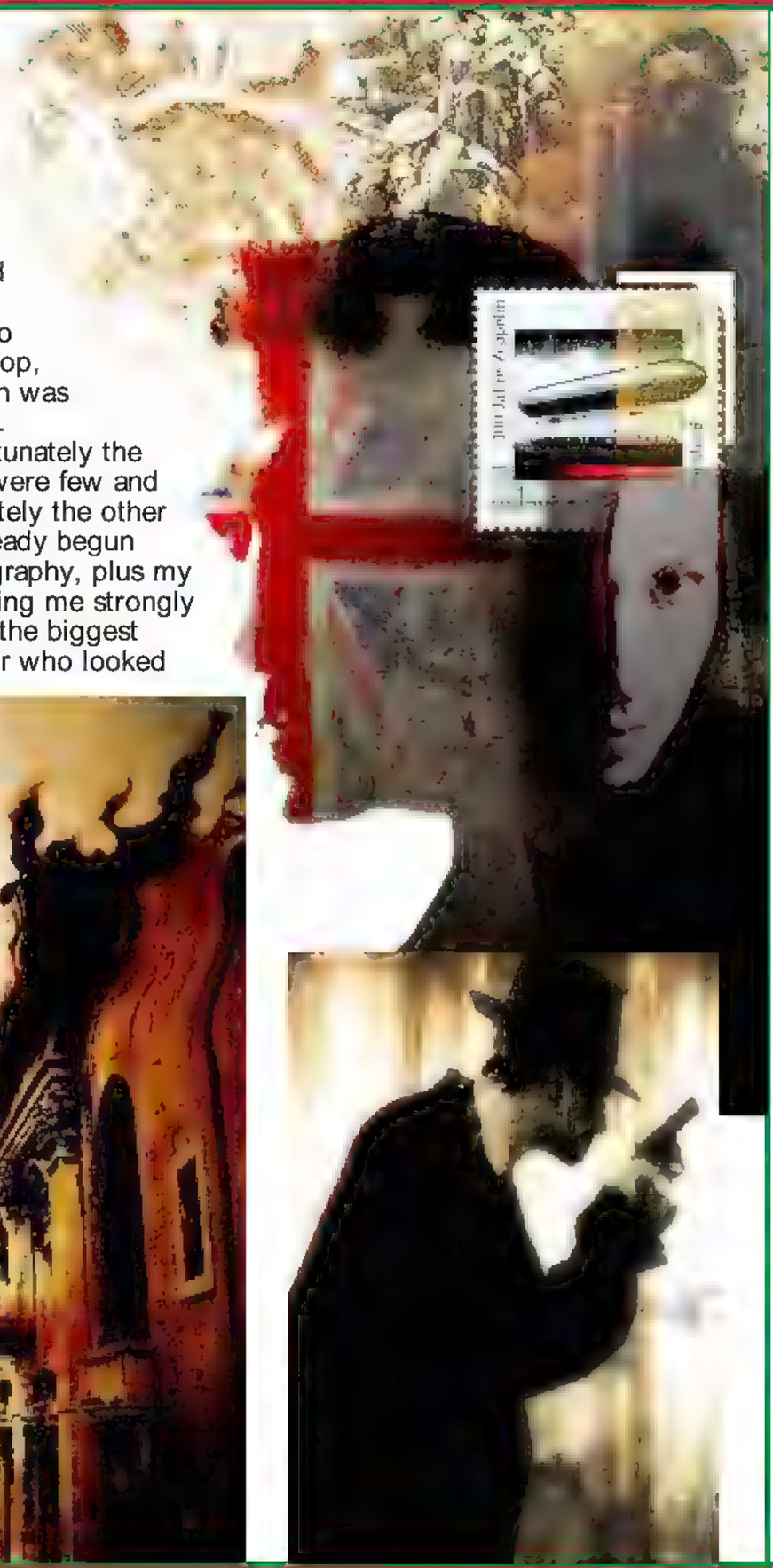
Still, at least **Slingers** stuck to its guns and didn't try to make any drastic U-turns in order to survive. It stuck with its simple stories, and what it did, it did well. It didn't try to flood later issues with Cable and Wolverine to stave off cancellation, and when it did throw in the towel, it did so because the heroes themselves had decided that in a world overrun with superheroes, it made more sense for them to leave the superheroing to people who were better at it than them. So off they walked into the sunset, missed by no-one except me - and any other old Marvel zombie with a heart. Go on, give it a try - you'll probably pick up the whole series for less than the price of a pint of beer.

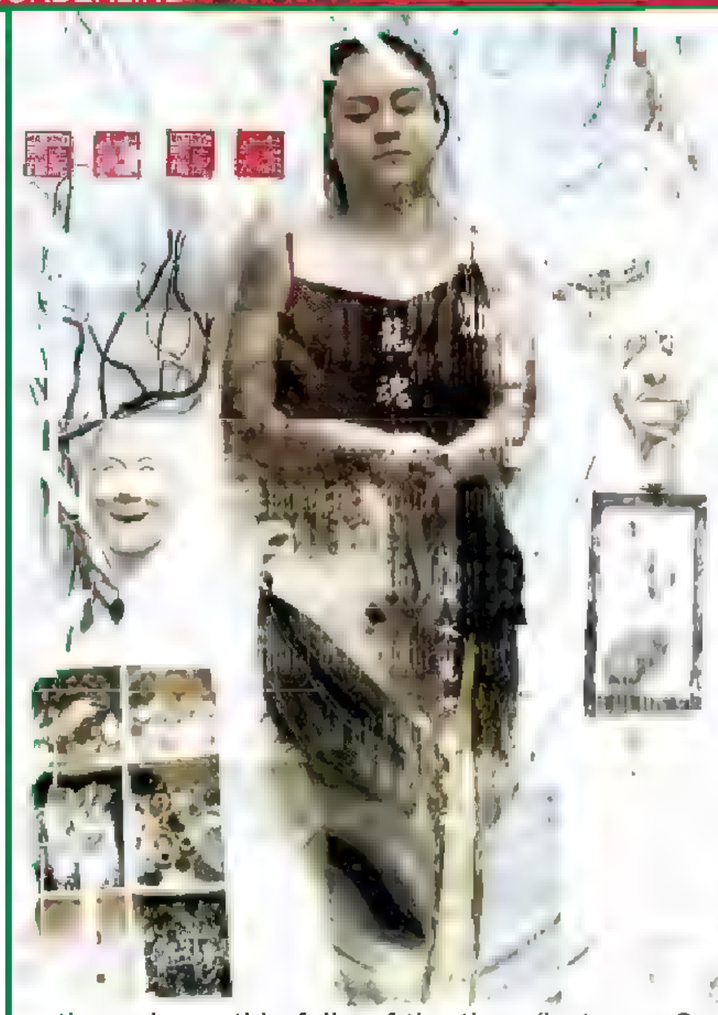
YOUNG GUNS

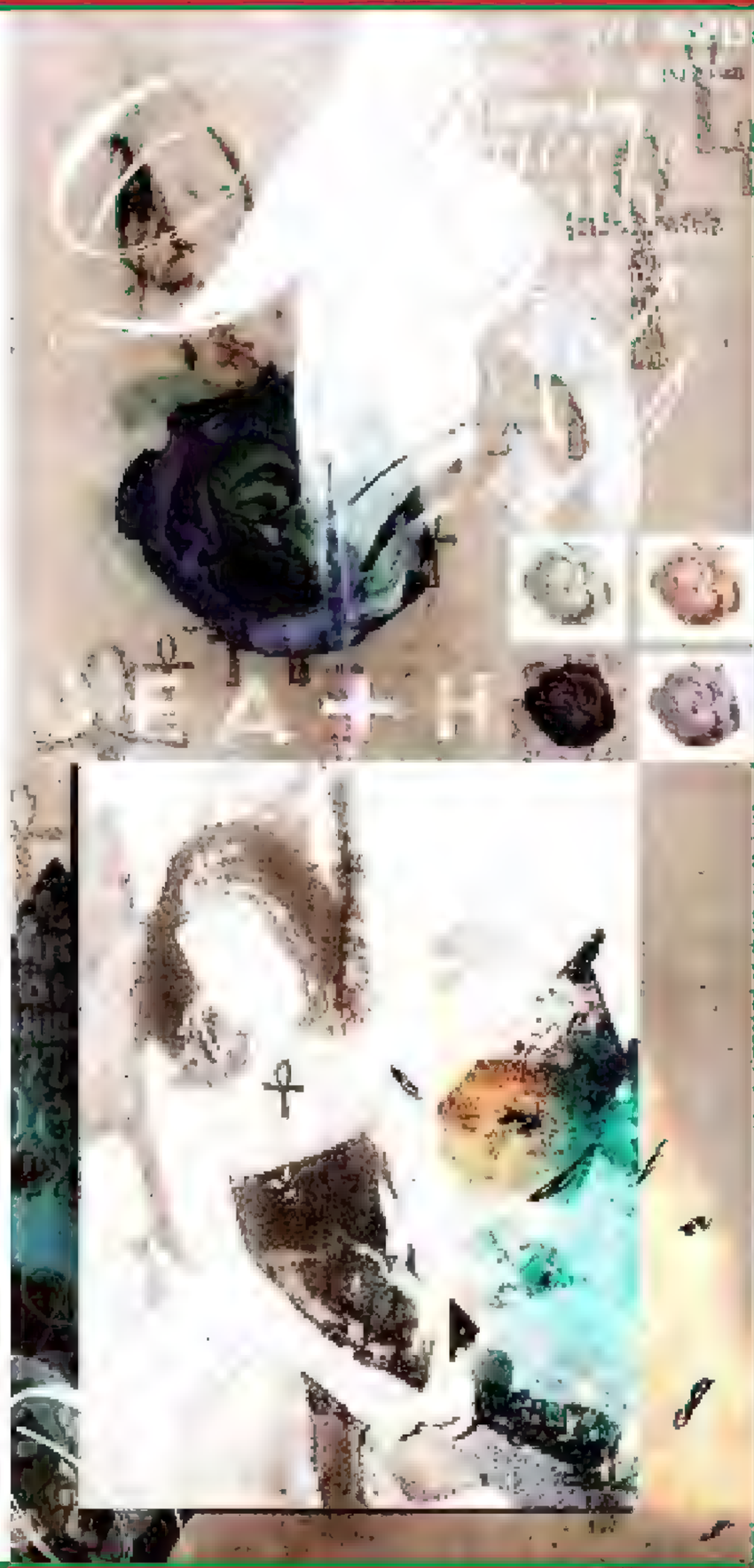
It's not age but talent that determines tomorrow's stars today... this issue: Tim Seelig

BECOMING an artist was never part of the plan. Okay, at the back of my head it was a bit of a pipe dream, but I didn't think I'd ever pursue it. Writing was my original goal. I had put together a small press magazine called Dream Factory at the end of 1998 and towards the end of '99, along with a bunch of like-minded guys all wanting to get into comics. What helped us were the likes of other talented types such as Trevor Hairsine, Henry Flint, and Shaky Kane, who pitched in with artwork and stories. We had to stop, well, basically because I put up the money, which was becoming short, and I was still doing my degree.

I got into illustration during the third year. Unfortunately the opportunities for creative writing on the course were few and far between, so my liking started to ebb. Fortunately the other half of my degree was Media Arts, and I had already begun specialising my studies in Photoshop and photography, plus my liking for artists such as Dave McKean was directing me strongly in what I now wanted to do (Dust Covers being the biggest influence). I also talked to a commercial illustrator who looked







through my thin folio of the time (just over 2 years ago), and asked whether I had considered doing illustration seriously. That changed everything. For my final project I did a 16 page sequentially illustrated story called *Familiar Strangers*, made up of a mixture of photographs, sketches, photocopies, textures etc., the background of which was a piece on Narrative and Realism based on Violent Cases (by McKean and Gaiman). After graduating, I realised I wanted to do photomontage illustration more than anything, so in a leap of faith I went freelance. My inexperience was quickly stripped of naivete, through a series of empty promises made by people connected to companies who said they were going to give me work. I also placed a page in Contact - something, it seems, that works well as long as you're well established. But I kept my hand in, after all I enjoyed just keeping my folio fresh, and my skills up to date, by constantly experimenting with my style.
A number of commissions followed. These included EP covers for several upcoming bands, some covers for a now growing independent comic firm called Warpton, and commercial montages for an electronics firm. Then, thanks to Jbel Meadows at Tripwire, I was introduced to Jbe Gentile at Moonstone Books. Jbe couldn't give me work to begin with, but greeted my samples with enthusiasm. I persevered, and a couple of months later he gave me a cover job, and then another, and another. Which brings us pretty much to the present, where I now find myself on four of the Noir titles coming out before the end of the year. I'm doing the cover to issue 3 of the Warpton title Nature's Guard, and I've also done the cover for the current issue of Tripwire (which features a rather Rasputin-ised Alan Moore blended into a photograph from the turn of the last century). Thanks to Comics 2002 in Bristol I got the opportunity show my work to the likes of Karen Berger (DC Vertigo), Axel Alonso (Marvel), and Jamie Rich (Oni) amongst others, all of whom gave me favourable reviews. I have since been asked to send my work on to the offices at Marvel and DC. Fingers crossed…
e-mail – *tim.madjazz@btinternet.com* Links: *www.wysi.org* & *www.moonstonebooks.com*

RYSOWNICA (THAT MEANS DRAWING BOARD IN POLISH)

A selection of great Polish artists...

*LAST issue we ran a feature about the burgeoning Polish comics industry. As with many of the Balkan countries in the 1990s, it has a multitude of talented artists who have had no recognition outside their own country... until someone discovered them. Here is a selection of nine of Poland's top artists' work – expect to see some of them cropping up in Dark Horse, Marvel, DC and Image series in 2003! This list of Polish comic artists has been compiled by Witold Tkaczyk [comics publicist, editor of **AQQ**] and Dennis Wojda [scriptwriter and illustrator, co-author of **Mikropolis** and **Tabula Rasa**].*

Krzysztof Gawronkiewicz –

Illustrator, born in Warsaw where he works and lives with his wife and daughter. Gawronkiewicz is a double Grand Prix winner at the comic festival in Lodz – 1969, individually [1992] and Mikropolis: A Chair in Hell, together with scriptwriter Dennis Wojda [2000]. He has worked with a large number of talented scriptwriters: Grzegorz Janusz - author of surrealistic stories and comics such as Kinoman [illustrations by Gawronkiewicz]; Krystian Rosinski – multimedia artist and performer, scriptwriter of the controversial Zelig series [illustrations by Gawronkiewicz]. Krystian is the nephew of Grzegorz Rosinski, author of Thorgal; Dennis Wojda – scriptwriter of the grotesque Mikropolis and surrealistic Tabula Rasa series. Gawronkiewicz works as a storyboard artist in the advertising industry, he is also a renowned book illustrator. Most known as illustrator of Tabula Rasa a magically realistic tale, set in an unreal vision of Warsaw and the Mikropolis series, published in a large number of magazines since 1994. Participant of many exhibitions in Poland and abroad.

Style: He is well known for being able to imitate most styles spanning from superb realism to a highly individual form of the grotesque. One can find the influence of Bilal and Moebius in his work. He is a perfectionist and a true professional, master of different techniques induding aquarelle, oil painting, ink [black and white], collage etc.

Individual publications: Mikropolis – Przewodnik turystyczny [Mikropolis – The Tourist Guide] – script by Dennis Wojda

Other publications: Gazeta Wyborcza, Max, Playboy, Marie Claire, Fluid, Aktivist, Arena Komiks, AQQ, Meble, Brum, Plastik, The Egmont Anthology of Polish Comics Artists etc.

Contact: [+48 505] 957330, email [intermediary]: *dennis@mikropolis.com.pl*, website: www.mikropolis.com.pl

Olaf Ciszak –

A young illustrator and scriptwriter at the beginning of his career as a comics artist. He is the author of 'decadent-catastrophic' SF comics. Most known as the author of the Karsten Storosz series. Oszak has been awarded at the comics festival in Lodz.

Style: A very vivid and expressive style with elements of the grotesque. His colour is very synthetic and gloomy.

Other publications: Arena Komiks, Produkt, The Egmont Anthology of Polish Comics Artists and various fanzines.

Contact [intermediary] Witold Tkaczyk: [+48 602] 344916, email: *twitek@glos.com*

Krzysztof Ostrowski –

Ostrowski is at the moment more known as lead singer in *Cool Kids of Death*, a controversial indie/ punk combo from Lodz where he lives. [Jacek Fras, 2001 winner of the debut category at Angouleme, plays drums in the same band.] A graduate of the Academy of Fine Arts in Lodz [fashion design faculty], Ostrowski prefers to write his own scripts.

Winner of the Grand Prix at the comics festival in Lodz 2001 together with Dennis Wojda [script]. Freelances as designer, illustrator, fashion designer and storyboard artist.

Style: His style is aggressive and expressive but yet very synthetic and readable. He admits of being inspired by the work of McKean and McKeever.

Other publications: Plastik, Przekroj, City Magazine, Hiro, Arena Komiks, The Egmont Anthology of Polish Comics Artists etc.

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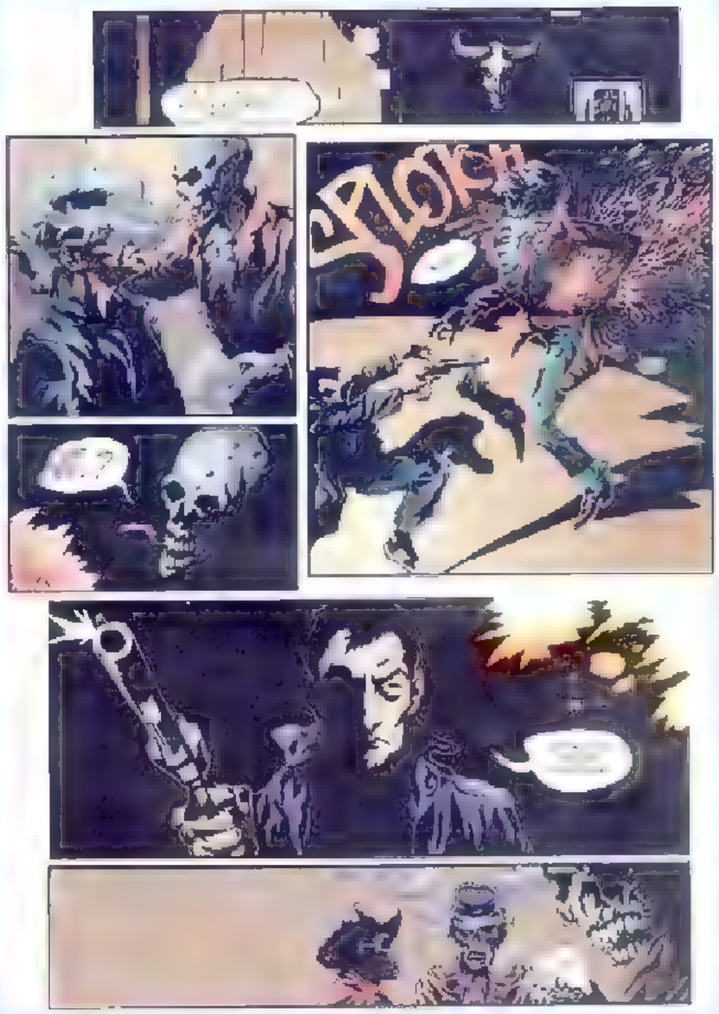

Slawomir Jezeirski [1963] and Radoslaw Kleczynski [1966]

Jezierski [illustrator] and Kleczynski [scriptwriter] are best known for their humoristic comics series about Kic, a blue rabbit. They both live and work in the Gdansk area. One of Poland's most professional comics partnerships with numerous publications. Alongside Kic they also make satirical comics and adaptations of literature as well as advertising projects, book covers and illustrations. Jezierski won the Grand Prix at the Lodz festival in 1996.

Style: Jezierski uses a very clean and perfect pen stroke and strong bright colours. Kleczynski's storylines are witty and intelligent. They are good exponents of a more traditional comics style and are just about to publish their first Kic album at a major publishers.

Individual publications: *Olbrzymy na wyspie [The Giants on the Island] – illustrations by Jezierski, script by S. Stecewicz; Alicja w krainie czarow [Alice in Wonderland]* – adapted by Jerzy Szylak.

Other publications: AQQ, Czas komiksu, Fan, Kelwin i Celsjusz, SuperBoom!, Komiks-Fantastyka, Swiat komiksu and various magazines. Contact [via] email: *twitek@glos.com*

Jerzy Ozga (1968) –

Illustrator, scriptwriter, sculptor, author of animated films. Graduate of the Fine Arts Academy in Katowice, where he lives with his wife and child. One of Poland's most recognized comics artists, he prefers to work with a closed group of scriptwriters - Miarka, Lysak, Rebosz. Also co-author of the comics adaptation of Quo Vadis by Henryk Sienkiewicz and favourite storyboard artist of the renowned film director Lech Majewski.

He experiments with all genres of fiction: Historical, SF, fantasy and crime thrillers, but he also deals with everyday and philosophical subjects. Also the co-organizer of Poland's first comics festival in Katowice back in 1991 [the festival was later moved to Lodz].

Style: He is a very mature artist with a unique style full of virtuoso. A master of shape and chiaroscuro. Capable of drawing almost everything. He uses a very light contour before colouring but his black and white works are rather grotesque in style.

Individual albums: Misja rozpaczy [Mission of Despair] – script by A. Ozga; Pokoj Sary [Sarah's Room]; Crashlanding; Quo Vadis [2 volumes]; Ern

Other publications: AQQ, Kelwin i Celsjusz, The Egmont Anthology of Polish Comics Artists, Czas komiksu, Klatka, Lekarstwo, SuperBoom!, Nowa Fantastyk etc.

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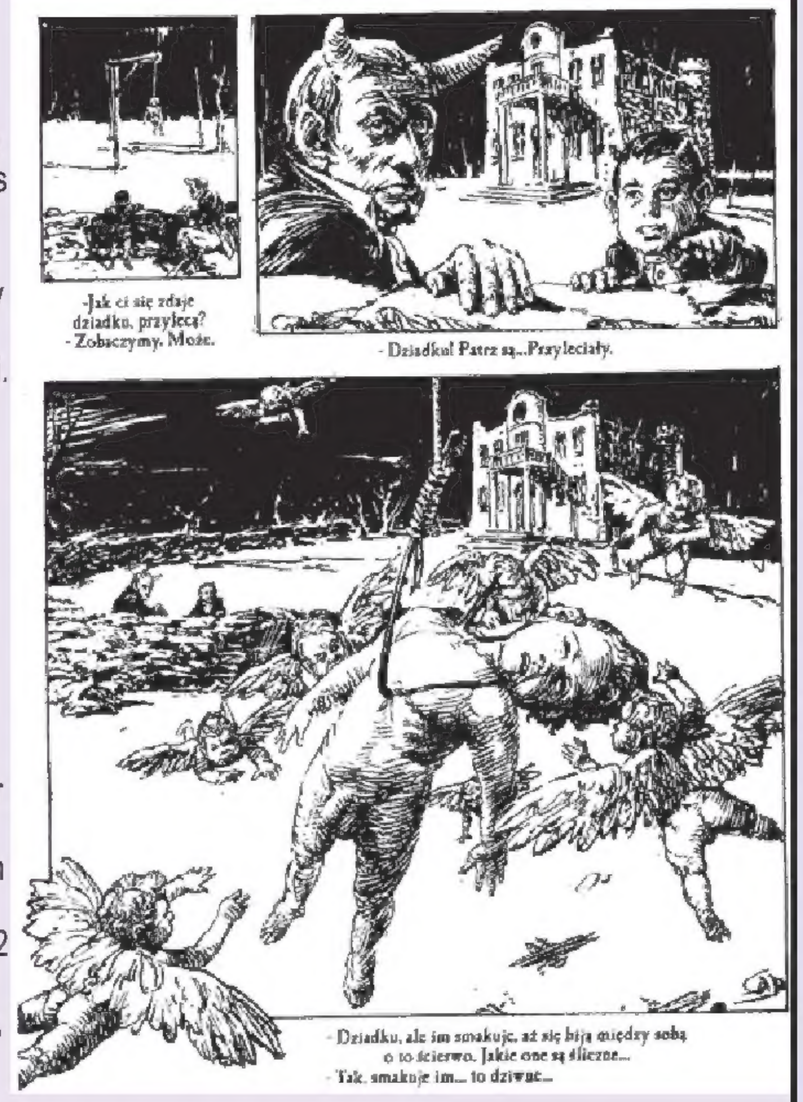
-Jak ci się zdaje dziadku, przyleci?
- Zobaczymy. Może.
- Dziadku! Patrz są...Przyleciały.
- Dziadku, ale im smakuje, aż się biją między sobą o to ścierwo. Jakie one są śliczne...
- Tak, smakuje im... to dziwne...

Tomasz Piorunowski (1969) & Agnieska Papis (1970)

Both are illustrators and scriptwriters and were both born in Lodz, where they graduated the Academy of Fine Arts. They now live in Warsaw where they work for a big advertising agency, Piorunowski as a full time storyboard artist and Papis as an art director. They are members of the *Contur* group that organizes the comics festival in Lodz. Piorunowski is also co-editor of the ambitious comics magazine Arena Komiks [together with Tomasz Tomaszewski] and the now cancelled Czas Komiksu.

Style: Piorunowski is very talented, especially when it comes to realistic illustrations. A good sketcher with characteristic clean contours and strokes. He is also a good imitator of the grotesque style of the French. Papis does the colouring in the Paula series and her beautiful aquarelle technique can be seen in The Menuete.

Individual albums: Paula - script by Piotr Kabulak

Other publications: AQQ, Czas komiksu, The Egmont Anthology of Polish Comics Artists, Komiks Forum, Arena Komik etc.

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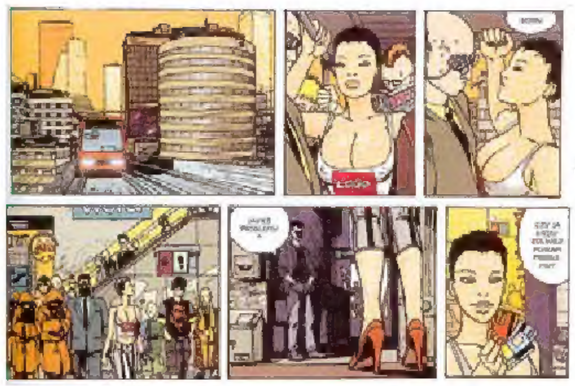

***Robert Adler** - we wanted to find out what we could about this exceptional artist whose influences appear to be Otomo and Manara. We'll track him down and see what else we can show you*

Poitr Kania (1972)

Born in Lodz where he graduated the Academy of Fine Arts. Lives with his wife and child in Warsaw where he works as an illustrator and designer in the advertising industry. Author of short satiric and philosophic comics and a former member of *Contur*. The 1998 Grand Prix winner at Lodz. Participant of many exhibitions.

Style: Master of a hyper-realistic style resembling photographs. He works with watercolours and sometimes experiments with photographic collage.

Other publications: Cosmopolitan, SHE, AQQ, Komiks Forum, Czas komiksu, Cartoon of Sita, The Egmont Anthology of Polish Comics Artists.

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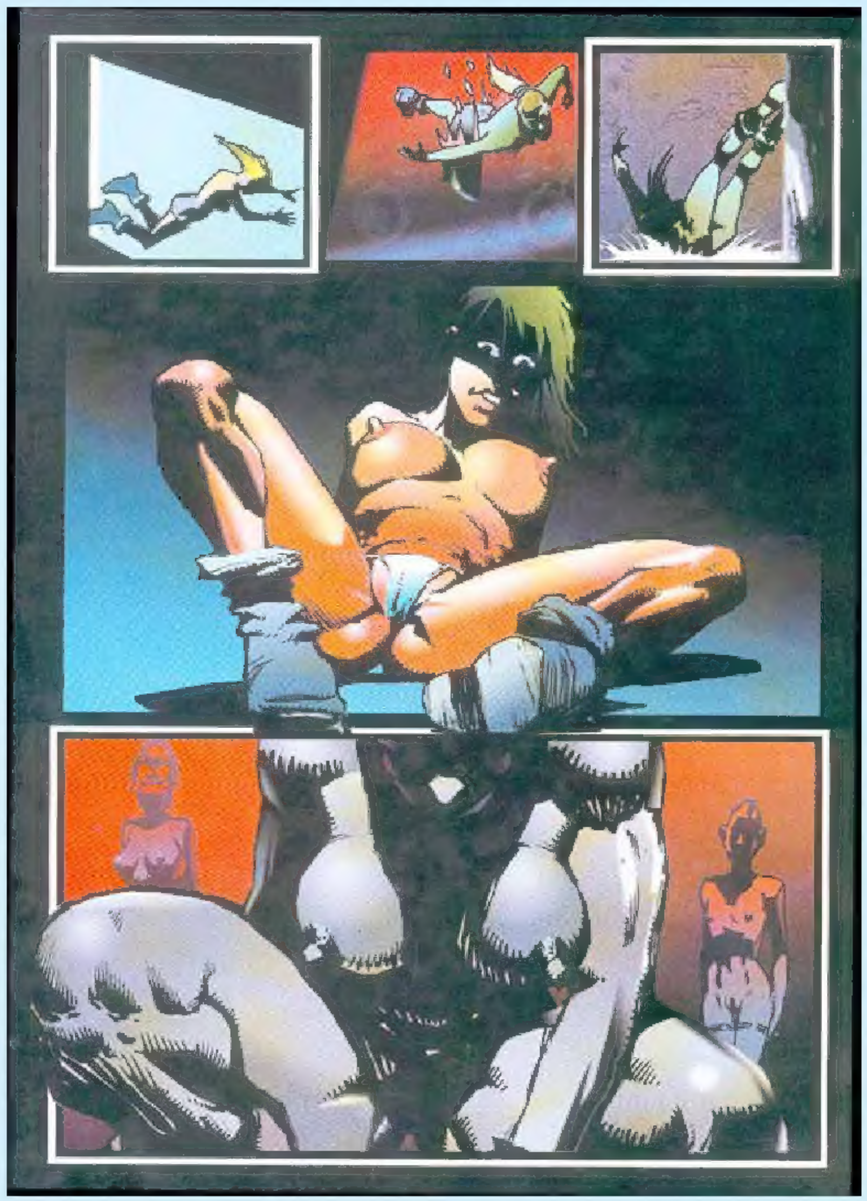


Jacek Michalski (left) & **Andrej Janicki** (right)

Janicki and Michalski are both scriptwriters and illustrators. They often collaborate in their work. They are both graduates of the Art High School in Bydgoszcz where they live. Janicki is co-founder of the *Studio Komiks Polski* group and editor of the comics magazine Awantura [1990-1991]. They are both under the influence of the work of the late Jerzy Wroblewski [famous Polish comics artist from Bydgoszcz]. Their comics are a mix of SF and crime story. Their most famous collaboration is the SF series Aurora about the adventures of two police detectives. They also do illustrations for books and the advertising industry. They have received awards at the comic festival in Lodz.

Style: Realistic with elements of grotesque. Janicki's drawings are a bit hard with lots of technical details, whereas Michalski's are more soft in style. Michalski's colourings are more powerful and specific. They reach top performance in their collaborations where Janicki draws the layouts and Michalski does the inking.

Individual albums by Michalski: Roy; Zagadka Metropolii [The Secret of the Metropolis]

Other publications: AQQ, Awantura, Czas komiksu, Swiat Gier Komputerowych, The Egmont Anthology of Polish Comics Artists, Fenix, Produkt, Nowa Fantastyka, Magia i miecz, Znakomiks.

Contact [intermediary] Witold Tkaczyk: [+48 602] 344916, email: *twitek@glos.com*

WORLD OF HEROS

"I saw Frank Miller and Alan Moore eating small children," claims Bill Jemas from padded cell.

Chris Spicer & the World of Heros investigative team continue to scour their imaginations for all kinds of bollocks...

WOH AT COMICS 2002 – BELIEVE!

COMICS 2002. The UK's premiere comics festival, and home to the National Comics Awards, at least the least most respected award in the industry. Founded in 1906, the festival continues to be popular, mostly with people, and this year attracted some big-name creators, some of whom actually came. We went along, determined to fling open the closets of the comics industry and gibber at the mouldering skeletons therein.

Award Of Court

THERE was some consternation at the National Comics Awards at Comics 2002 when Jack Kirby won the award for Best Comic Artist Ever - and controversially refused to come to the stage to accept his prize. Despite repeated prompts from the embarrassed award presenter, Kirby steadfastly refused to even make his presence in the hall known. It's since become common belief that Kirby was making a protest of some sort, although his continued silence has led to confusion as to exactly what he was protesting against.

Diamond Hard

ON the opening day of the Comics 2002 festival, Diamond Distribution held a secret "seminar," entry to which was available by "invite only." Why all the secrecy? Could it have something to do with some sort of "death ray"? We don't know - do you?

Joe Q Queues For Cue

JOE Quesada was spotted in a Bristol bar after the National Comics awards at Comics 2002, downing pints of Harp and telling young ladies that he knew what was in Spider-Man's tights. Later he was involved in a brief scuffle after someone put his twenty pence piece onto the pool table, and at one point could be seen with his arm draped around Grant Morrison's shoulder, apparently encouraging him to "put the hinky dinky evil-eye" on DC Boss Paul Levitz before breaking into a loud chorus of *Mad About The Boy* and dancing around the bar like an overweight ballerina.

Later, Quesada was seen having a conversation over his cell phone, during which we overheard him telling the other person how much he missed them and calling them his "shnookylumps." After further investigation, we were able to re-dial the number and made it through to Bill Jemas' office before Quesada, moving surprisingly quickly for a fat man, tackled us to the ground and demanded we give him his phone back.

We're just wild about Avi

Slipping in almost unnoticed was Marvel's Avi Arad and his sock puppet, Bo, who he had trouble smuggling through customs. When asked how he was, Arad replied, "We IS good. We IS on hols. We like. We go there now. We go wee, too!"

"We know where the best pizza parlours are in New York, so who really gives a flying fart about the quality of our comics?" Joe Quesada.

PHIL HALL MAKES BORDERLINE "BRAZILIAN" - CARNIVAL!!!

IN a shock press release, **Borderline** editor Phil Hall has announced that from next month **Borderline** will drop all pretence of being anything other than his personal vanity project when it relaunches as **Phil Hall's Worthy Brazilian Comics Monthly**.

According to Hall, submissions for next month's magazine will take place as normal. "The only difference," Hall told us, "is que os editasse fora de todo o recognition até que não contenham nada mas referências aos comics obscuros pelos criadores de Brazilian de que you.ve nunca se ouviu e que you.ll nunca começam uma possibil-idade ler! E parsombal nada que você pode fazer para me parar! Bwa ha ha ha!."

E que do *World of Heros*? Salão assegurou-nos que a coluna continuaria em untouched, mas como assim que Chris Waddle ele friccionava suas mãos junto e ria maniacally, assim que Hall nao inclinetta para acreditá-lo.

Nós falamos (below with toothless vampire) aos vários criadores dos comics ao garner suas reações às mudanças, mas eram todos distante envolvidos demasiado acima em seus próprios projetos do vanity para comentar. And there you have it!

INTERNET GOSSIP COLUMNIST EATS CRISPY CHINCHILLA - ICK!

"You know NOTHING," said Rich Johnstone, the Internet's number one gossip columnist, amidst allegations that, after a sexual tryst, the most hated man in comics then proceeded to eat his sexual partner – a crispy, deep-fried Peruvian chinchilla called Mick.

Bizarrely, Johnstone (who doesn't spell his name like that) cited Paul Levitz in the private education of his three children, Snail, Doris and Skreep Diesil and claimed that the papers for the paternity suit were already being drafted and, we quote "Levitz is running like the bitch he is..."

A spokesperson for DC Comics frowned and continued to have that puzzled expression we've often seen from these no hope promotions people. "I'm sorry sir but what you've just said to me makes no sense at all and Mr Levitz hasn't got the time to deal with this at the moment, he runs a busy and profitable company and we urge you that these libelous comments need to stop soon or we'll send the same boys round to you that dealt with Christian Alamy." She then ripped off her corporate suit and revealed a sexually provocative Wonder Woman costume. Hmm...

Meanwhile Jonah from some comics web site that are apparently paying Johnstone in wool for his new column said, "Are you guys sure you're talking about Rich Johnston? You've spelt his name wrong and I'm really sure all that stuff about the hamsters, the Vicks Synex and the cocaine trafficking are all made up or about someone else."

We contacted Mr Johnstone and asked him a number of questions, unfortunately he answered them all and in many cases with far too many words.

"Comics are about listings and adverts, not about artwork and creators," Mildly famous comics hasbeen.

WIN WIN WIN WIN WIN WIN WIN WIN WIN

In association with Shoto Press
Borderline is giving away 10 copies of
Garlands of Moonlight by Jai Sen & Rizky Wasisto Edi

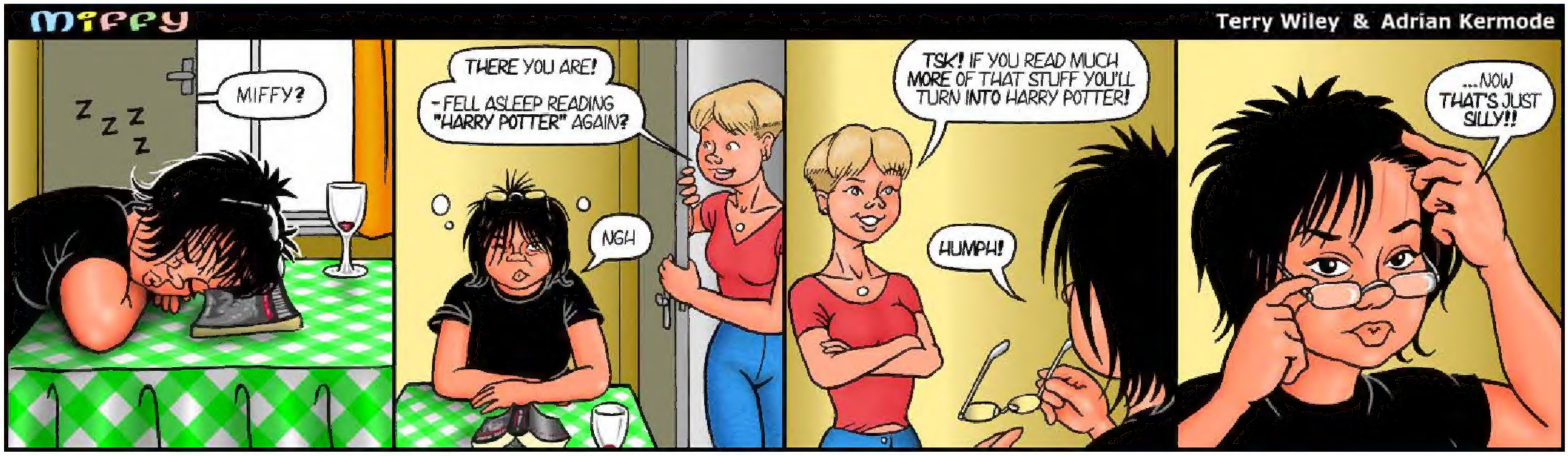
Shoto Press's Xeric award-winning graphic novel is simply stunning and we've got a stack of them to give away...
And all you've got to do is answer a simple question to win one!

Borderline has ten copies of Shoto Press's luscious metallic ink Garlands of Moonlight supernatural thriller to give away to the first names drawn out of the World Cup 2002 tombola on September 1st, with the correct answer to the following question:

Which independent comics creator founded the Xerics?

a) Kevin Eastman
b) Peter Laird
c) Grzegorz Rosinski

Send your answers either by email to: editorial@borderline.mediahall.co.uk
or on a postcard to the editorial address before September 1st 2002. Include a mailing address in your reply.


Miffy
Terry Wiley & Adrian Kermode
Z Z Z Z
MIFFY?
THERE YOU ARE!
-FELL ASLEEP READING "HARRY POTTER" AGAIN?
NGH
TSK! IF YOU READ MUCH MORE OF THAT STUFF YOU'LL TURN INTO HARRY POTTER!
HUMPH!
...NOW THAT'S JUST SILLY!!